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# The virtues of the self: ethics and the critique of feminist identity politics

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## Abstract

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This thesis is situated at the intersection of feminist political theory, identity politics and moral philosophy. Its broader aim is to show the positive consequences of returning the self and its inner activity to the ethical domain for feminist identity politics. To this end, it brings feminist identity politics into dialogue with contemporary developments in virtue ethics, in particular Christine Swanton's pluralistic virtue ethics. As its starting point, it takes issue with the tendency to reduce the complexity of identity to issues of category. The first part of the thesis problematises this tendency and argues for a reconsideration of the question of identity politics by shifting the focus away from identity *per se* and towards a more complex picture of the self that is reflective of the constitutive relation between the self and identifications, commitments and values. The work of the post-modern feminists Wendy Brown and Judith Butlers are read as proposing just such a shift away from the identitarian engagement of identity politics of 'who am I?' towards a more ethically imbued engagement that centres a complex self with inner depths. Part Two of the thesis extends this reconceptualisation of the problematic of identity politics and elaborates on what it could mean to undertake such a shift and how such a project could be conceived. Drawing on both Michael Sandel's and Michel Foucault's formulations of the self, identity and its relation to the good, the thesis develops the argument that the problematic of identity politics, articulated in ethical language, enables the formulation of an argument for giving an account of the good life and that this entails developing a subject imbued with a full inner life. Part Three of the thesis argues that contemporary work in virtue ethics offers the best way to take this project forward, suggesting that it represents a positive development in conceptions of the self and that a complex picture of the person emerges that provides the basis for a richer approach to the ethical concerns raised in identity politics. The thesis concludes by illustrating the potential value of taking those feminist insights into the constructed nature of identity into dialogue with a pluralistic virtue ethical account of the self and suggests that this approach provides

new opportunities for understanding and discussing the collective dimension of identity politics in situations of diversity and inequality.



## Declaration

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I hereby declare that, except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is entirely my own work, and that no part of it has been submitted for any other degree or qualification.

## Introduction

The contemporary debate in Anglo-American feminist theory about identity politics has led to a critical impasse<sup>1</sup> and mired feminism in what has been termed an ‘identity crisis.’<sup>2</sup> This debate is generally framed within the conflict of two seemingly irreconcilable ways of thinking about identity categories. On the one side, the identity of women is best understood as essentialist.<sup>3</sup> Essentialists, along with strategic essentialists,<sup>4</sup> argue that feminism has been at its most powerful when it is grounded in an understanding of the identity of women as sameness and unified. On the other side, deconstructionists<sup>5</sup> argue that the notion of ‘woman’ as a unified identity should be rejected in favour of multiply shifting, open-ended processes of identification.<sup>6</sup> Feminists, by and large, tend to align themselves with one of these

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<sup>1</sup> See Linda Alcoff, ‘Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,’ *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture in Society*, Volume 13, Number 3 (1988); Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, London: Routledge, 1990); Jodi Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1996); Susan Hekman, ‘Beyond Identity: Feminism, Identity and Identity Politics,’ *Feminist Theory*, Volume 1, Number 3 (December 2000); Susan J. Hekman, *Private Selves, Public Identities: Reconsidering Identity Politics* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2004); Alison Stone, ‘Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy,’ *Journal of Moral Philosophy*, Volume 1, Number 2 (2004); Allison Weir, *Sacrificial Logics: feminist theory and the critique of identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>2</sup> Alcoff coined this term to describe the crisis in feminism over the concept of the subject ‘woman.’ See Alcoff, ‘Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory.’ Hekman picks up on this in subsequent work. See Susan Hekman, ‘Identity Crises: Identity, Identity Politics and Beyond,’ ed. Susan J. Hekman, *Feminism, Identity and Difference* (London: Franc Cass, 1999). See also Fiona Webster, ‘The Politics of Sex and Gender: Benhabib and Butler Debate Subjectivity,’ *Hypatia*, Volume 15, Issue 1 (Winter 2000).

<sup>3</sup> This is work that originated with Carole Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: psychological theory and women’s development* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1982); Nancy Chodorow, *The reproduction of mothering: psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978); Jean Bethke-Elshtain, *Public Man, Private Woman: women in social and political thought* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993 [1981] 2<sup>nd</sup> ed).

<sup>4</sup> For instance see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *In other worlds: essays in cultural politics* (New York, London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Under the heading of ‘deconstructionists,’ I place both postmodernism and poststructuralism – i.e. the work of theorists like Judith Butler and Wendy Brown.

<sup>6</sup> See Vikki Bell, *Feminist Imagination: genealogies in feminist theory* (London: Sage, 1999). Bell argues for an understanding of feminism as ‘the exposition of a shared non-identity,’ (19).

two options.<sup>7</sup> More recently, some feminists have suggested that it is time to move ‘beyond identity,’<sup>8</sup> casting blame for the fragmentation of both activist and academic feminism here.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, some feminists have withdrawn from advancing any notion of shared values as essential for collective politics, viewing such claims as invariably false and complicit in the normalisation of privileging some forms of femininity over others.<sup>10</sup> Still others critique this sidestepping of the issue of identity, arguing that feminist theory thereby neglects the difficult question of collective feminist politics.<sup>11</sup> What these critiques hold in common is that it is identity that gives shape to the ethical relation.

This thesis builds the argument that it is the reverse that is true. It is the *ethical* relation in identity politics that shapes identity. It is the relation of the self to others, to commitments, to values, in short, to what moral philosophy refers to as the ‘good life,’ that shapes identity. This thesis challenges the claim that diversity and postmodernist feminism neglect the difficult question of political collective action. I argue that identity politics are ‘practical politics’ in the sense that diverse groups of differentially situated individuals attempt to form and maintain collectivities for the purpose of carrying out political projects that have to do with how old forms of oppression can be resisted and what new ways can be created. In coming together to work on shared projects though, differentially placed individuals are placed differentially in relation to each other. Women’s organisations in Northern Ireland that have attempted to work across the sectarian divide are illustrative of the sort of hard, on-going, as well as risky, work involved in forging shared political projects

<sup>7</sup> For recent exceptions to this trend, see for instance Dean *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*; Weir, *Sacrificial Logics*.

<sup>8</sup> Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*; Hekman, ‘Beyond Identity: Feminism, Identity and Identity Politics.’

<sup>9</sup> See Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*; Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth, *Redistribution or Recognition: A Political-Philosophical Exchange* (London: Verso, 2003); Hekman, ‘Beyond Identity: Feminism, identity and identity politics,’ 289-308; Moya Lloyd, *Beyond Identity Politics: Feminism, Power and Politics* (London: Sage, 2005); Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> See for instance Stone, ‘Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy.’

<sup>11</sup> Allison Weir, ‘Global feminism and transformative identity politics,’ *Hypatia*, Volume 23, Number 4 (October-December, 2008): 110-133; Nira Yuval-Davis, ‘Human/Women’s Rights and Feminist Transversal Politics,’ *Global feminism : transnational women's activism, organizing, and human rights*, edited by Myra Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp (New York, London : New York University Press, 2006).

across difference. This ‘practical work,’ I argue, is best understood through the notion of *praxis*.

## Practical work as *praxis*

*Praxis* is derived from the Greek verb meaning ‘to do’ or ‘to act’ and is concerned with intentional action or conscious achievement. Aristotle distinguishes *praxis* from *poeisis*; the latter term is concerned with making things, whereas the former includes activities such as theory. With Rousseau, the concept is employed to explain social and political transformation.<sup>12</sup> In Marx, we find its contemporary form, where it is used to explain the processes of labour, but the emphasis remains on transformation: ‘By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he (she) at the same time changes his (her) nature.’<sup>13</sup> For Marx too, *praxis* is collective, not individual, action. It is an important term of use in feminist theory since the 1970’s and is loosely taken to indicate that point at which one moves from informed awareness to political action. Postmodern accounts like hooks’ argue though that a feminist understanding of *praxis* is often premised on an emphasis of identity. This can create the illusion that one is engaged in *praxis*. However, she argues that ‘any *praxis* within a political movement that aims to have a radical transformative impact on society cannot solely be focussed on creating spaces wherein would-be radicals experience safety and support.’<sup>14</sup> Feminist movement, she insists, in order to end oppression, must actively engage participants in a struggle that is ‘rarely safe or pleasurable.’<sup>15</sup> For hooks, *praxis* is about collective politics and requires of the individual a cultivation of an ethical concern for the oppression of others that she, herself, is complicit in.

This is the ethical link between *praxis* and identity politics that both Brown and Butler, in different ways, are pointing towards and that this project aims to connect. It is in Foucault, I argue, that we find the workings of this connection clearly

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Jaques Rousseau, *The Discourses and other early political writings*, Victor Gourevitch (ed/translator) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, ‘Theses on Feuerbach,’ D. McLellan (ed) *Selected Writings: Karl Marx* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 28-30.

<sup>14</sup> bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>15</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 30.

specified. Foucault also can be read as positing *praxis* in reference to activism and consciousness. Key is the same integration of *theoria* and *praxis* that Aristotle wrote of, as well as the integration of reflection with action and collective work that aims at transformation. What is most important for Foucault, and an element that I develop, is that the term *praxis* is to be understood as an intentional ‘achievement’ that depends upon developing, not only knowledge of the self, but importantly, the self-reflective capacities of the agent.

Whereas, *poesis* is about making and thus, completing some *thing*, *praxis* is doing as a mode of conduct that contains its meaning in itself. Therefore, completion is contained within its satisfactory accomplishment rather than in producing a product. Acting though is never completed in the sense that a product in *poesis* is. Because each action entails some further action, in any given instant, the subject is never finished with her task and yet is at her goal, which is good action. This suggests the further Greek term *telos* and presses the further question of what motivates resistance to old forms of oppression and what motivates inventing new ways of life. In order to highlight that identity politics is a form of political activity that should be understood as *praxis*, I argue for reframing the debate within terms closer to those of the traditional discourse of ethics.

I argue that what has become lost in the so-called ‘paradigm wars’<sup>16</sup> of feminist identity politics, is not the unified subject, but a lack of attention to these important ethical issues that belong under the rubric of identity politics – namely issues to do with the relation of the self to others, the relation of the self to values and ideals, the relation of the self to self, both within the context of an individual life, as well as, within the context of a collectivity – in short, *praxis*. The ‘paradigm wars’ have focussed too much on identity as a category, with questions tightly revolving around defining the ‘woman’ question – is she constructed or is she essential? The focus on identity as *category* has led to a lack of focus on the ethical grounding that is necessary for connecting identity to politics, which is the liberatory dimension of identity politics.

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<sup>16</sup> Seyla Benhabib, ‘Sexual Difference and Collective Identities: The New Global Constellation,’ *Signs*, Volume 24, Number 2 (Winter, 1999), 335-361.

## **Mutually exclusive prospects for contemporary feminism as a collective political movement? Reframing the debate**

The aim of this thesis is to develop this ethical rephrasing of the identity politics debate. Therefore, this project is not intended as a contribution to the assessment of the general worth or accomplishments of identity politics, nor as a critique of it as a form of oppositional politics. My intent is to think through the link between identity, politics and the self, not with the aim of developing a wholesale critique and repudiation of identity, but rather, in order to develop, in a constructive way, an account of identity that places the self and how to live at the centre of feminist politics and theory. I seek to look at how feminist theory might move the debate on identity politics and identity away from identity politics as a matter of category to identity politics as a matter of vision, commitment and value. This, I will argue, requires centring the notion of a complex self that is capable of taking on the very practical, ethical work that identity politics requires.

The suggestion to move the debate in feminist identity politics away from definition and category and towards something more like ethics is not a new one. It is a turn that has been suggested increasingly, in the last years, by feminists normally thought of as poststructuralist or postmodernist. Wendy Brown is one such feminist theorist who argues that feminist politics has been mired in trying to answer the question of ‘who am I?’ Posing the question of identity in this manner she views as having led to a stagnant moment for feminism, because it insists upon a fixity of position and a defensive closure of identity. Brown proposes instead to shift the question of ‘*who am I?*’ to that of ‘*what do I want for us?*’ Although she does not elaborate exactly what such a shift might look like, I argue that she is suggesting that the way for feminism to engage in a more explicitly political project is through an ethical turn – an engagement with the issue of conceiving of the good (life).

Judith Butler is another important feminist who more and more explicitly argues for a similar shift. Although in her earlier work she has been sceptical of the role of ethics in politics and has expressed the worry ‘that the return to ethics has constituted

an escape from politics,’<sup>17</sup> I argue that in her most recent work, similarly to Brown, Butler engages ever more explicitly in the development of an ethical project as the means by which to undo restrictively normative conceptions of life and thus, gives us pause to re-examine her earlier work on identity politics and the self in this light.

The broader aim of this thesis is to show the positive consequences of returning the self and its inner activity to the ethical domain for feminist identity politics. How can this project be imagined? How can the question of the self in the context of how to live, that is, ethics, be placed at the centre of feminist political theory? And what would such a shift look like? What theoretical and philosophical resources are available to elaborate such a vision of the self? To this end, I bring the problematic of the self in feminist identity politics into dialogue with contemporary developments in moral philosophy, in particular virtue ethics. I seek to elaborate on what it could mean to undertake such a shift and how we could go about conceiving of such a project by proposing looking at resources out with feminist political theory. I ultimately suggest that reconceptualising identity politics in this manner, in which the ethical is brought to the fore, places feminist theory in dialogue with a particular kind of ethics – virtue ethics.

## Methodology

This research is primarily problem driven and therefore, in the main, it is diagnostic. I look again at the debates in feminist identity politics and pose the following questions: What is it that is at issue here? Is it really a crisis about identity as category? If it is not, what is it? What happens when the very practical aspect of identity politics that has to do with the collective nature of politics is foregrounded? That is, what happens when emphasis is placed on the practical politics of working together with different others, in a context of alterity, towards concrete goals, rather than, articulating essential or ontological meanings? What then is at stake? Because what emerges is that identity politics concerns the self, in order to answer these

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<sup>17</sup> Butler, Judith. ‘Ethical ambivalence,’ *The Turn to Ethics*, edited by Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz (New York, London: Routledge, 2000).

questions, I find it necessary to situate myself at the intersection of feminist political theory and moral philosophy. That is, I begin with the identity politics debates in feminist theory, but in recovering the practical aspect of the work that is required by individual agents who participate in identity politics projects, I find that I must turn to moral philosophy. Turning to moral philosophy for these purposes brings me into contact with a literature not normally used in the debates in feminist identity politics.

Because when the practical aspect of identity politics is foregrounded, the problematic emerges as one to do with the self, I turn specifically to a tradition in moral philosophy that is agent-centred and that centres questions to do with what sort of self one should be. These are primarily questions to do with character and it is for this reason that I turn to virtue ethics. I spend some time distinguishing between different virtue ethical approaches in order to point out some of the advantages of the virtue ethical approach to thinking about identity politics as practical politics.

I do not confine myself to any particular methodology, or school. The problematic of feminist identity politics is complex and crosses many boundaries – liberalism, postmodernism, political theory, moral philosophy. None of the theorists that I draw on confine themselves to any one particular school and in fact, all work to refuse this. Instead, what I offer are close readings of a few theorists – Brown, Butler, Sandel, Foucault and Swanton, and to a lesser extent Murdoch - and I attempt to read these philosophers on their own terms. This leads to alternative readings and allows me to draw out elements often overlooked by others who have approached these philosophers from a particular school of thought or methodological classification.

In choosing the theorists that I focus on, I looked for approaches that met certain criteria to do with approaches to the self. I sought out approaches that take up the problematic of ethics and the self, not from the vantage point of an autonomous, independent chooser in the context of universal principles, but rather as an issue of grappling with those features of sensibility that a person must have in order to be receptive to the complex task at hand. In short, I looked for traditions of ethics that offer conceptions of a self with a complex inner life.



This project is intended as a contribution to the understanding and politics of identity and the self from a feminist and a philosophical perspective. The research begins with an exploration of the understandings of identity politics and the self and ends by advocating an approach that places the question of the self in the context of how to live, that is, ethics, at the centre of feminist political theory. This contextualisation brings poststructuralist/postmodernist accounts of identity into dialogue with non-feminist accounts of ethics, in particular, virtue ethics. I draw mainly on the work of philosophers with interests in both traditions and interests in Ancient Greek philosophy, in particular Michel Foucault, Iris Murdoch and Christine Swanton. These philosophers, although not explicitly feminist, I believe offer resources that can be used to address feminist concerns.

Within feminism and feminist theory, this project has been most influenced by North American feminism, though I also draw on work, and have been influenced by, British feminism. In particular, I engage with the work of Wendy Brown and Judith Butler. I also draw on the work of a number of others, especially those doing work in political theory.

It might be asked why I have not incorporated a consideration of the ethics of care literature into my research; after all, care ethics is often taken as a feminist version of virtue ethics. I have deliberately chosen not to enter these on-going debates in feminist theory.<sup>18</sup> Part of the goal of this project is to draw on the strengths of a literature that appears to have resources for feminist theory and that, thus far, has not been extensively explored. To this end, I think that it is more fruitful at this point to assess this literature on its own terms and not in terms of care ethics.

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<sup>18</sup> See for instance Raja Halwani, 'Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics,' *Hypatia*, Volume 18, Number 3 (Fall 2003); Maureen Sander-Staudt, 'The Unhappy Marriage of Care Ethics and Virtue Ethics,' *Hypatia*, Volume 21, Number 4 (November 2006).

## Structure of the text and main arguments

The thesis is organised into three parts: Part One is entitled, ‘Re-thinking feminist identity and identity politics’ and defines the theoretical and philosophical issues and sketches the framework suggested for the reconceptualisation of identity politics for which I argue. Part Two, entitled ‘Reframing the identity politics debate: attending to the self,’ presents the resources that I argue can assist in the elaboration of this framework. Part Three, entitled ‘Virtue ethics and the self,’ offers a picture of the agent that a pluralistic conception of virtue ethics allows.

Part One begins with Chapter Two, *Identity politics* in which I explore the terms of the debates in the feminist identity politics literature. I begin with an examination of its theoretical context within the terms of liberalism. I then look at four main approaches to the issue of identity and identity politics in feminist theory. I discuss how these four differing accounts approach the issue of the self and how this relates to the very practical politics of working together, which is a hallmark of identity politics. The chapter thus, sets the scene as well as the rationale for the thesis. Finally, I suggest that the normal terms of the debate in identity politics tend to reduce the complexity of the identity question to questions of category, thereby neglecting other important questions to do with *praxis*. I suggest that this alternative approach to identity politics, offers a fruitful reframing of the debates in terms closer to ethics, a position I pursue in subsequent chapters.

In Chapter Three, *Identity politics and the subject of ethics*, I offer a non-standard reading of Wendy Brown and Judith Butler in order to begin formulating my main argument that, whilst disclosing the limits the liberal project of rationality and universalism, feminist identity politics must aim to do so without foreclosing a radical rethinking of ethics and therein identity. By introducing the notion of identity as ‘injury,’ Brown reconceptualises the subject by attending to the issue of sentiment, or what she terms the ‘psyche.’ Identity politics becomes not only a project of disrupting the category of the neutral, universal citizen, but also one of *participating* with different others in the defining of a ‘common good,’ or the ‘good life.’ I conclude

that Brown can fruitfully be read as pushing for a re-framing of the primary problematic in feminist identity politics as an ethical one, which she importantly differentiates from a moral one.

I then turn to the work of Judith Butler, whom I argue is making a turn to ethics similar to that of Brown. I argue, contrary to what have become the most familiar criticisms of Butler's work, that she is not advocating a move beyond identity politics, but rather her early work, in particular, is diagnostic and should be read as pointing towards understanding the problematic of identity within an ethical framework. After setting out Butler's views on the self in her early work, I argue that we can already see here resources for formulating an argument about the value of an ethical turn as an emancipatory political strategy, and that this becomes ever more apparent in her later work. Viewed as a whole, this body of work begins to articulate a rehabilitation of ethics as a move toward an energised political future for feminism as a necessarily political and coalitional project. I conclude that to substantiate an ethics as suggested by both Brown and Butler requires accessing some resources out with either feminist ethics or traditional ethics (equated with morality) and this I move to do in Part Two.

Part Two begins with Chapter Four, *The turn to ethics: the subject of ethics*. The main aim of this chapter is to begin identifying the resources that can be accessed in order to develop the ethical turn I point to in Part One. I start by making a distinction between the terms morality and ethics. This distinction brings me into dialogue with a similar distinction made in mainstream critiques of liberalism, the starting point of which broadly parallels feminist identity politics. I use Michael Sandel's critique of Rawls to develop the distinction between ethics and morality which paves the way for my reconceptualisation of identity politics. On the basis of the distinction I make between morality and ethics, and using Foucault's later work, I elaborate a definition of ethics that points in the direction that I plan to move - towards an ethics that is more about becoming, but within the context of difference. This signals a shift that Brown made away from the negativity of resistance and the politics of *ressentiment* towards an aesthetics of existence that is a framework of *praxis*. A framework

derived within the notion of *praxis* moves beyond the delimiting factors of difference in identity politics. The self within this ethics as *praxis* is not reducible to the practices of the self in the private sphere. So, although I signal a turn inward, this turn inward is in order to turn outward. The turn inward is one that is transformative and is meant to emphasize a futural dimension.

In Chapter Five, *Ethics as praxis: the self, transformation, desire, vision and the good*, I develop in more detail the notion of ethics as *praxis*. Whereas in the previous two chapters, I read Brown, Butler, Sandel and Foucault as pointing towards understanding ethics as *praxis*, in this chapter I argue that it is Foucault's engagement with ancient Greek philosophy that really begins to develop this project. I raise here again the questions: what sort of self do we find in ethics understood as *praxis*? How does the self of an ethics of *praxis* account for difference? How does the self undertake collective projects? How is the issue of *ressentiment* approached? To this end, I discuss in detail how Foucault elaborates ethics as *praxis* of 'care of the self', drawing out those elements of Foucault's understanding of ethics to do with transformation of the self. I show how Foucault's ethics as *praxis* deals with the issue of alterity in a manner that is constructive within the problematics of identity politics. In this chapter I also move to address the unresolved issue of *ressentiment*. Although Foucault's 'care of the self' does not entirely neglect the issue raised by Brown - of the presumption of the direction that *telos* takes - I argue that it could be strengthened. In order to do this, I draw on some of the work of Iris Murdoch to show how, within an ethics of transformation (*praxis*), this problem could be elaborated.

Part Three opens with Chapter Six, *Virtue ethics and feminism: Okin, Tessman and Nussbaum*. In this chapter, before making my move to defending a pluralistic virtue ethical approach, I look at some feminist engagements with virtue ethics. I do this for two reasons: firstly, in order to address some of the key concerns that feminists have expressed about an engagement with virtue ethics; and, secondly, to distinguish the virtue ethical approach I am both defending and developing. I look first at Susan Moller Okin's influential critique of Aristotle's virtue ethics and Alasdair

MacIntyre's neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics because it is illustrative of some of the main objections that feminists have raised about an engagement with virtue ethics. I then move to examine two directions feminism has attempted to take virtue ethics forward by looking at the recent work of Lisa Tessman and Martha Nussbaum. Although both Tessman and Nussbaum's approaches have a number of strengths, I ultimately reject them as unsuitable for my purposes and argue in the following chapter that a pluralistic approach to virtue ethics provides a better way forward for my project.

In Chapter Seven, *Pluralistic virtue ethics and the self*, I draw mainly on the recent work of Christine Swanton to argue that a pluralistic conception of virtue ethics successfully elaborates a self (identity) that is inextricably related to the good, where the notion of the good is not finally definable. I explore how a pluralistic virtue ethics, that is non-eudaimonistic, conceives of the self. Beginning from an understanding of virtue not as an end state of perfection, but as a 'dynamic process-notion',<sup>19</sup> a number of ethical concepts - such as love, respect, creativity and objectivity - contribute to a rich picture of the inner life of the self. The aim of this chapter is to show how a pluralistic virtue ethics addresses the central notion of 'desire' as comprised of both 'vision' and 'attention' and yields a picture of the self with the full resources of an inner life. A complex picture of the person emerges that provides the basis for a rich approach to the ethical concerns raised in identity politics.

In Chapter Eight, *Practically speaking: applying pluralistic virtue ethics*, I offer a rough and very tentative illustration of what a pluralistic virtue ethics (PVE) might look like when applied to a specific context. I look at the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC) and in particular, how they handled a particularly divisive case. I discuss: how the self I am arguing for can be expected to function when applied to the practical task of ethics; how this self might act when it comes to a real life situation in which problem-solving is involved; how this self derives virtue-knowledge; what the aims of this self would be in problem-solving situations; and

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<sup>19</sup> Christine Swanton, 'Nietzschean Virtue Ethics,' ed. Stephen M. Gardiner, *Virtue Ethics Old and New* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 192.

finally, what the virtues of practice are that this agent might exercise. Although there are certain similarities between ‘transversalism’ and the pluralistic virtue ethics (PVE) approach I take, this chapter argues that the latter approach offers a richer and broader framework through which to understand the self in feminist identity politics and thus, may serve as a resource to enrich the transversal politics framework. By exploring the practical applications of PVE, this chapter is both a contribution to the debates in identity politics as well as to the growing developments in virtue ethics.

In the final Chapter Nine, *Conclusion – Reformulating feminist identity politics and the problematic of ethics as praxis*, I draw together the main arguments of the thesis, namely that taking feminist insights of the constructed nature of identity into dialogue with a pluralistic virtue ethical account of the self provides new and illuminating opportunities for both understanding and discussing the imperative collective dimension of identity politics in situations of diversity and inequality.

## **Part One: Re-thinking feminist identity and identity politics**

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## Identity Politics

### Introduction

Anglo-American feminist theory is said to have reached an impasse in the debates on identity politics. Some feminists have gone so far as to proclaim that feminist theory is in the throes of an ‘identity crisis.’<sup>20</sup> The aim of this chapter is to explore the terms of this debate, so as to set the scene and provide the rationale for this thesis, which concerns shifting the debate on identity as category to a more ethically orientated understanding of identity.

The first section begins by placing the issue of identity politics within the context of the limits of liberalism. Identity politics works within the framing terms of liberalism and seeks to transform oppressed identities. By politicising identity, identity politics is simultaneously a response to the limits of the self that is viewed to sit at the heart of liberalism *and* made possible through the terms of liberalism. The aim of this section is to draw out some of the main, very practical elements of identity politics. Namely, that identity politics entails a concrete and ethical understanding of the issue of community that requires responsiveness and action from the self. This concrete and ethical dimension must be recovered and focused on in order for identity politics to function as transformative. This very practical work, I argue, requires a certain sort of understanding of the person that is to undertake it and therefore, raises questions to do with what sort of person can undertake this work.

The next section looks at identity politics within feminist theory. Here I take the position that feminism is an identity politics from both within and without. I do not offer a complete rehearsal of the extensive and on-going debates on identity politics

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<sup>20</sup> Alcoff, ‘Cultural Feminism Versus Poststructuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory.’



in the feminist literature. Rather, I offer a broad outline, concentrating on foregrounding the issue of the sort of self that each approach to identity takes.

## Identity politics

### The liberal self

Liberalism can be defined as a theory of the principles which should govern politics. Contemporary accounts of liberalism, as found in the work of Dworkin, define it in terms of a neutrality of politics between differing conceptions of 'the good life':

Political decisions must be, so far as possible, independent of any particular conception of the good life, of what gives value to life. Since the citizens of a society differ in their conceptions, the government does not treat them as equals if it prefers one conception over another.<sup>21</sup>

Larmore concurs that in liberalism:

The ideal of neutrality can be best understood as a response to the variety of conceptions of the good life. In modern times we have come to recognise a multiplicity of ways in which a fulfilled life can be lived.....The state should not seek to promote any particular conception of the good life because of its presumed intrinsic superiority, that is because it is a *truer* conception.<sup>22</sup>

Sandel summarises the liberal vision as:

.....a just society seeks not to promote any particular ends, but enables its citizens to pursue their own ends, consistent with a similar liberty for all; it therefore must govern by principles that do not presuppose any particular conception of the good.<sup>23</sup>

According to Sandel, in liberalism a just society is just on the basis of its refusal to choose in advance among competing purposes, rather than on the basis of a particular aim. Liberalism distinguishes emphatically between the political (public)

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<sup>21</sup> Ronald Dworkin, *A Matter of Principle* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), 191.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Larmore, *Patterns of Moral Complexity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press: 1987), 43.

<sup>23</sup> Michael J. Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,' *Political Theory*, Volume 12, Number 1 (Feb. 1984), 82.

and personal (private) spheres, insisting that the one should not be reflected in the other. In the face of pluralism, liberalism demands that differences based on competing conceptions of the good life are set aside. Instead, neutral principles of cooperation should be pursued. That is, the liberal society aims, through its constitutions and laws, to provide simply a framework by which citizens can pursue their own, private *telos*. In liberalism the 'right' is positioned prior to the 'good' in the sense that, contrary to utilitarianism, individual rights are never cast to one side (or 'trumped' to invoke Dworkin) for a greater good. Furthermore, contrary to a teleological approach, governing principles of justice, which specify these rights, cannot be based upon any particular conception of the good.

Sandel goes on to examine the 'vision of the person' that lies at the heart of liberalism that 'both inspires and undoes it.'<sup>24</sup> This he traces through Kant's transcendental subject directly to Rawls' 'unencumbered self.'<sup>25</sup> What Sandel finds here is a relegation of all that is deemed personal to the private realm. 'Public man' embodies all those liberal qualities of rationality, autonomy, separation. Feelings, emotions and relations are relegated to the private, non-political realm. These latter emotional elements have no place in the public and political sphere. Any private differences between people are therefore to be considered irrelevant.

Rawls' 'vision of the person', according to Sandel, is a self stripped of the self-knowledge of the identity markers of class, race, gender, etc.<sup>26</sup> Equipped only with a general knowledge of economic systems and psychology, individuals are said to proceed with measured caution in the knowledge that once the 'veil of ignorance' is lifted, they could find themselves to be in the 'worst off' position in society.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, those principles chosen behind the 'veil of ignorance' would be directed at ensuring the 'worst off are in the best possible position given alternative outcomes.'<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,' 82.

<sup>25</sup> Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,' 83.

<sup>26</sup> I return to Sandel's critique in much more detail in Part Two.

<sup>27</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, [1971] 2000).

<sup>28</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 118-138.

The aims of politics and morality are understood to be based on what all persons share in common. Since differences are considered contingent, they are either irrelevant or are obstructions to be overcome. In Rawls, neither moral judgments nor political institutions should appeal to 'those contingencies (i.e. social identities) which set men at odds and allow them to be guided by their prejudices.'<sup>29</sup>

Deontological liberalism, in its prioritisation of the 'right' over and independent of the 'good,' demands an understanding of the self as 'prior to and independent of purposes or ends.'<sup>30</sup> This configuration results in the placement of the self beyond the reach of experience. Therefore, identity is secured beyond the possibility of constitutive ends. This is liberalism's 'generic human thesis': society can and should be organised behind a Rawlsian 'veil of ignorance' where personal and contextual issues are put aside.<sup>31</sup> In short, in liberalism, identity has no place in the public/political arena.

## Identity politics and liberalism

Identity politics can be placed within the counter movement away from the 'unencumbered self' of liberalism and its prioritisation of the 'right' before and independent of the 'good.'<sup>32</sup> Identity politics explodes the myth that identity is irrelevant to liberalism and to the self. Identity politics brings identity into the public sphere, thereby breaking the most central tenet of liberalism of a clear separation between the public and private spheres. In bringing the particularities of identity into the universal public, identity politics seeks to throw off Rawls' 'veil' protecting the abstract, neutral citizen sitting behind it and in so doing reveals his identity. Identity politics aims toward an embodied somebody, rather than a disembodied nobody. By bringing excluded identities into the political arena, identity politics constitutes a radical challenge to the neutrality of liberalism by revealing that identity matters to the universal citizen.

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<sup>29</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 19.

<sup>30</sup> Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,' 86.

<sup>31</sup> Linda Alcoff, 'Cultural Feminism versus Post-Structuralism,' 326.

<sup>32</sup> This portrayal of liberal theory is not uncontested. Neal, for instance, maintains that liberalism is not neutral with regard to the good. See Patrick Neal, 'A Liberal Theory of the Good?,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 17, Number 3 (September 1987), 567-582.

The contemporary social movements, including feminism, of the post-1960's period, were based on the premise that the very personal and contextual experiences of being black, being female, etc. functioned to marginalize some groups of individuals from the liberal 'generic human thesis.'<sup>33</sup> Therefore, such movements began to formulate and validate political claims on the basis of certain shared social identities and locations, as women, lesbians, black women and so on.<sup>34</sup> The distinct character of identity-based politics thus is its politics of difference. As Sonia Kruks summarises it:

What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identitarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is qua women, qua blacks, qua lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of 'universal humankind' on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect 'in spite of' one's differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself as different.<sup>35</sup>

Identity politics rest on the shared experience of the injustice of oppression and originate in the negative experience of oppression in which visible identity markers (the colour of skin, gender, race, etc.) are deemed inferior or subordinate and are on this basis subject to oppression. Political philosophers like Shklar remind us that the experience of injustice is a felt one and therefore, is personal.<sup>36</sup> Although born through a primary hurt, identity politics does not stay here, taking up residence only in the felt experience of a personal injury, but make particularized social demands.<sup>37</sup>

The demands for respect and 'recognition' are practical ones in that they generally take the form of claims for certain kinds of legal recognition and state support. Those groups premised on shared, oppressed identities, approach the state for recognition of a characteristic, or attribute, and demand recognition on the basis of the very grounds upon which recognition has previously been denied: it is 'qua women, qua

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<sup>33</sup> Linda Alcoff, *Visible identities: race, gender and the self* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 143.

<sup>34</sup> Deborah Cameron, *The Feminist Critique of Language: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998), 17.

<sup>35</sup> Sonia Kruks, *Retrieving Experience: Subjectivity and Recognition in Feminist Politics* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2001), 85.

<sup>36</sup> Judith N. Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>37</sup> Alcoff, *Visible identities: race, gender and the self*.

blacks, qua lesbians' that groups demand recognition. Affirmative action programs and the securing of maternity rights for women count as such instances.

Particularising the a priori self of universal liberalism pries that self out of its 'unencumbered' position and contextualises it within its raced, sexed, sexualised, and so on position. Once positioned, the self seeks to reclaim, or to reconstitute, to transform those characteristics and markings that serve to oppress and subordinate the self. Slogans such as 'Black is beautiful' and 'Sisterhood is beautiful' are employed to express the transformative intent of identity politics. On the basis of similarity within the identity category, politics are formed, demands are worked out and pursued.

The liberal self is now particularised, yet is left intact. Just as in liberalism, the self is still located prior to rights and constitutive ends. But if identity politics are 'category politics',<sup>38</sup> where identity categories refer to terms associated with individuals' identities, for example 'women,' 'blacks,' 'gays,' etc., then to label someone as, for instance, a 'woman' is to make the case that someone so labelled has certain discernible characteristics in common with others in the same category and hence, is *categorisable* as such. What this points towards is that identity politics have a constitutive component. That is, if identity politics are category politics, the individual does not *only* decide freely and strategically to categorise herself, but is categorised – becomes categorisable – and therefore, the identity category has a constitutive function. What this implies is that in the liberal schemata, identity, once it is introduced, may have the impact of reversing the configuration of the self as 'prior to and independent of its ends.' This raises the following questions: Do those ends become defined in advance of the self? Is it now possible that the ends become constitutive of the self? Does a strong concept of the autonomous individual become problematic, if not unsustainable?

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<sup>38</sup> Carol Lee Bacchi, *The Politics of Affirmative Action: 'Women', Equality and Category Politics* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Dehli: Sage Publications, 1996), 2-3.

Kenny points out that liberal democracy sits uncomfortably with any theory that lacks a strong concept of the individual.<sup>39</sup> In liberalism, once a group has been recognised as a personage irreducible to the universal citizen, the difference becomes ‘irremovable and constitutive’ of the identity and the associated politics.<sup>40</sup> That is, the difference in respect of which makes members of the group unique, once recognised, comes to define the group and the individual (as member of the group). Those involuntary associations of the identities of race, gender, sexual preference, which identity politics seek to politicise become, upon recognition by the state, ‘markings that stick.’<sup>41</sup> Identity is what Lloyd terms ‘constative’ in the sense that it is pre-given and represents in a qualitative manner ‘what we are.’<sup>42</sup> Identity therefore, becomes a site of closure; it is simultaneously the ‘necessary truth’ and an ‘expressive condition.’<sup>43</sup> What the individual is, finds its basis in a supposedly pre-given set of attributes particular to the identity marking. The individual’s life becomes describable by experiences that are taken to determine a particular *kind* of life. Thus, in the moment that the individual identifies, or is identified, with the group identity, the individual is marked by and through the identity. The group is ‘envisaged as a social personage, a plural subject driven by a singular collective will and coherent value set.’<sup>44</sup> The individualism upon which democracy is founded is transferred from the person to the group identity.

In summary, identity politics are politics premised on the ‘felt’ experience of oppression and as such, can be viewed as having an affective element. Identity politics are relational in the sense that oppression is experienced always in relation to some other social position – i.e. women vis-à-vis men, Black vis-à-vis White, and so on. The oppressed identity, situated in its position of inequality vis-à-vis some other position does not languish in its pain. Rather, it is ‘actional’ in that it works to uncover, discover, and demand recognition and amelioration for its oppressed

<sup>39</sup> Michael Kenny, *The Politics of Identity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> Kenny, *The Politics of Identity*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Sheldon Wolin, ‘Democracy, Difference and Re-cognition,’ *Political Theory*, Volume 21, Number 3 (August 1993), 467.

<sup>42</sup> Lloyd, *Beyond identity politics: feminism, power & politics*, 38.

<sup>43</sup> Lloyd, *Beyond identity politics: feminism, power & politics*, 36.

<sup>44</sup> Kenny, *The Politics of Identity*, 9.

positioning. On the basis of this positioning, individuals are grouped and form groups with the intention to transform the hurt of the oppressed identity.

## **Identity politics as practical politics**

Identity politics are practical politics in a sense that comes close to the notion of *praxis*. That is, identity politics, as activist politics, can be understood to depend upon a group of individuals acting in concert, as a collectivity. In identifying with each other, individuals identify with an identity category, as well as, with concrete other individuals in that identity category *as* ‘others.’ That is, I actively place myself in the identity category of ‘woman’ and recognise others in this same category. On the basis of this shared identity category the group forms and then creates a (shared) vision of what action it would like to undertake in order to *transform* the oppressed shared identity. Finally, once the group has a vision, it becomes necessary to formulate a plan of action.

In her research on women organising across differences in the Women’s Support Network in Belfast, Cockburn provides an illustration of the practicalities of identity politics.<sup>45</sup> The Network represents women’s community centres from Catholic and Protestant districts. Cockburn notes how the Network formed as an intentional women’s-only project, based on gender as a central organising principle in women’s subordinate status. The members are therefore, all committed to working under the conviction that there is something important at stake for women *as women*. Secondly, the ethnic, racial, religious and national diversity in the projects is intentional. There is a commitment to not only maintaining the small, nuclear collectivity, but also to forging and maintaining a wider and more inclusive collectivity. Thirdly, what the individual in the group *is* (i.e. Protestant or Catholic, for instance), should not pose a limit on what she is able to say and do in the collective. Cockburn argues that this is reflective of a commitment to an ethos that gives the participant responsibility for what she says and at the same time does not limit her by who she ‘is’. Although some political values and goals may be shared,

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<sup>45</sup> Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998).

there is also an open acceptance that divergences can emerge. The real possibility of divergences is what makes negotiation a necessity. Lastly, as a political collectivity, the democratic process is taken as paramount. Finding ways that all can have an equal say and allowing differing, opposing sides to be made salient is of particular importance. Crucially, what underlies all of the foregoing is the relation of the self as an individual to the collective.

Cockburn's research on the Network highlights the practical aspects of identity politics – the action of identification of the self within the identity category, to the group as well as to the vision of the work. All of this works within *and* moves beyond, the questions raised by identity as category, which most generally take the form of: Who am I? Who is like me? Whom can I trust? Where do I belong? Understanding the self as in a situation of *praxis* requires raising the two further questions: how to thematise the self in relation to the other in difference, and how, in difference, to achieve a shared vision. These questions are underpinned ultimately by what sort of self the self in *praxis* is. I will in due course argue that to formulate the problematic of identity politics as the 'I' being capable of articulating itself, and its desire, in relation to a 'for us,' points towards placing identity within the ethical, but before approaching this I turn to a discussion of identity politics and feminism.

## Identity politics and feminism

Identity politics form the basis of the women's movement.<sup>46</sup> It is within the context of liberalism that feminists have been compelled to address the identity of the 'subject,' introducing on the scene the concrete identity of the subject of feminism – 'woman.' There is much disagreement among feminists though over whether or not a unified conception of identity is imperative for an effective feminist politics. Braidotti and Fraser both discuss three competing assumptions at work in feminism with regards to the issue of the subject.<sup>47</sup> The first assumption, often referred to as

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<sup>46</sup> Margaret A. McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and embodied subjectivity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002), 118.

<sup>47</sup> Rosi Braidotti, 'The Subject in Feminism,' *Hypatia* Volume 6, Number 2 (1991), 155-171; Nancy Fraser, 'Multiculturalism and Gender Equity: The U.S. 'Difference' Debates Revisited,' *Constellations*, Volume 3, Number 1 (1996), 61-72. For a similar schemata, see Mary Dietz, 'Current



the ‘equality approach,’ is that feminism should seek to adopt an approach to the subject that advocates equality with men. This is the work associated with Wollstonecraft and later de Beauvoir.<sup>48</sup> The subject is constructed in such a manner as to place emphasis on the sameness between men and women. Equality feminism does not introduce the specificity of the subject (as woman), but rather relies on identity politics, insofar as it relies on a politics in which the subject is united under a category of universality. Identity politics serves as the basis for mobilization and organisation – i.e. sisterhood.<sup>49</sup> Identity is taken up as an organising basis vis-à-vis men and not from within the category of women.<sup>50</sup>

The second approach is based on a notion of the subject that reflects difference. Difference though takes two directions here. The first direction focuses on the difference between men and women. This strand is largely associated with the work of Carol Gilligan<sup>51</sup> and Nancy Chodorow<sup>52</sup> and is referred to as difference feminism, or cultural feminism. In this approach, difference tends towards a homogenisation of the identity of ‘woman,’ posed as it is contra men. It does not address the potential (and real) differences between women and has been robustly criticised for valorising differences between men and women whilst ignoring differences internal to women and the category of ‘woman.’ This second strand of difference feminism, sometimes termed ‘diversity feminism,’<sup>53</sup> or, ‘intersectional feminism,’<sup>54</sup> argues that theories that rely on a homogeneous identity category for women serve to exclude many women. Here the issue of identity is raised within the category of woman. Yet, both

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Controversies in Feminist Theory,’ *Annual Review of Political Science*, Volume 6, Issue 1 (2003), 399-431.

<sup>48</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (London, England: Penguin Books Ltd., [1792] 2004); Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage. [1953] 1997).

<sup>49</sup> Jane Gallop, *Anecdotal Theory* (London: Duke University Press, 2003).

<sup>50</sup> Although I am well aware that even from its very beginnings the women’s movement was troubled by issues of difference from within, as articulated by Sojourner Truth’s speech ‘Ain’t I a Woman?’ as well as vis-à-vis men, in ‘Wollstonecraft’s Dilemma,’ I am taking a very generalised approach in order to show broad positions. See Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and the Welfare State* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989), 196-7.

<sup>51</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*.

<sup>52</sup> Chodorow, *The reproduction of mothering*.

<sup>53</sup> Dietz, ‘Current Controversies in Feminist Theory.’

<sup>54</sup> See for instance Kimberle W. Crenshaw, ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color,’ *Stanford Law Review*, Volume 43, Number 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

difference and diversity feminism rely on mobilising women around unified similarities – around a shared identity.

The third approach to the issue of identity is a deconstructionist one. This approach contends that feminism must maintain a strong scepticism in regards to the fixing or predetermination of subjectivity. Whereas difference feminists assume a subject that has an identity that is similar across all women and is modelled on the liberal subject, the deconstructionist model insists that feminism does not need the subject. Not only does feminism not need the subject, but in adopting the subject, feminists adopt with it all the flaws and exclusionary premises upon which it is based.

Finally, to the above three models, I add the post-identity strategy of coalitional politics which is an approach that attempts *not* to take issue with defining subjectivity. It does not engage with the problem of identity, but rather attempts to sidestep the issue. Identity is presumed and not deemed something that needs to be defined or transformed.

Although I have presented differing approaches to the issue of the feminist subject in a way that makes them look as if one follows upon the next in some sort of developmental trajectory, this is only partially accurate. Certainly much of the feminist debate about the subject and identity engages with these four models as discrete and completely separate ways of thinking about the subject. But as Kemp and Squires point out, there is a productive tension between understandings of subjectivity.<sup>55</sup> Furthermore, although Hekman identifies the issues of ‘the potentialities of resistance’ and ‘the question of agency,’<sup>56</sup> as central to all feminist attempts to either reformulate or reconstitute the liberal subject, I argue that there is prior work that is missed by such a focus. I shift the focus on to the collective dimension of identity politics and the hard work required to forge and maintain

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<sup>55</sup> Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires, ‘Subjectivities,’ eds. Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires *Feminisms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 216.

<sup>56</sup> Susan Hekman, ‘Reconstituting the Subject: Feminism, Modernism and Postmodernism,’ *Hypatia*, Volume 6, Number 2 (June, 1991), 58.

political bonds. What becomes central, I argue, is the individual effort and attitude involved in this *practical* task.

In what follows, I outline what I take to be some of the representative arguments in each of these approaches to feminist subjectivity. I do not intend to offer a detailed account of each, but offer rather a broad outline, concentrating on foregrounding the issue of the self in relation to the practical work of identity politics – what I have termed *praxis*. Specifically I look at how the self is conceived in relation to the ‘other,’ both within the identity category as well as vis-à-vis the liberal subject. I also consider the self in relation to the ‘vision’ of the approach and in relation to values. I do so in order to reconsider what each approach takes as paramount in forging and maintaining political bonds.

Although within the feminist theory literature on the topic of identity politics there are feminists who confine the term to the description of ‘diversity’ feminism,<sup>57</sup> there are many others who employ the term more generally.<sup>58</sup> Lloyd, for instance, uses the term in this general sense,<sup>59</sup> noting that insofar as feminism is defined by the three concepts: ‘woman, experience, and personal politics,’ it is to be understood as an identity politics.<sup>60</sup> Together these factors determine the questions that feminism raises: What is a woman? Who and what might be responsible for women’s oppression and what are the solutions to the problems?<sup>61</sup> Organising around, and making demands for, a particular identity (‘woman’), counts feminism as an identity politics.<sup>62</sup> In what follows, I adopt this more general definition of identity politics, recognizing as well that identity politics is both an explanatory as well as a theoretical term. It is also a retroactive descriptor insofar as feminist theorists now

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<sup>57</sup> See Chris Weedon. *Feminism, Theory and the Politics of Difference* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. [1999] 2000), 168-9.

<sup>58</sup> See Diane Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms en abyme* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Lloyd, *beyond identity politics*; Marysia Zalewski, *Feminism after postmodernism: theorising through practice* (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>59</sup> See also Hekman, ‘Beyond Identity: Feminism, identity and identity politics’; Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction: Ms en abyme*; Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers*; McClaren, *Feminism, Foucault and Embodied Subjectivity*.

<sup>60</sup> Lloyd, *Beyond identity politics*, 37.

<sup>61</sup> Lloyd, *Beyond identity politics*, 37.

<sup>62</sup> Lloyd, *Beyond identity politics*, 37.

associated with the term may not have, at the time of their writing, named themselves or their theories as such.

## Identity politics and equality feminism

Insofar as identity politics is based on a notion of a shared identity of women, women are deemed to share certain universal characteristics. On the basis of these universal characteristics, women as a group can speak, or are spoken on behalf of. This understanding of identity politics forms the basis for a variety of liberal feminists to challenge and critique mainstream philosophical and political culture.<sup>63</sup> For these feminists, it is the 'liberal language of individual rights and freedoms that had tremendous resonances.'<sup>64</sup> As such, feminism and liberalism are historically closely related and indeed, early feminism did not question the premises of liberalism itself.<sup>65</sup> Instead, equality feminists used the liberal notions of universal reason and natural law to fight for the full participation of women in social and political life.<sup>66</sup> Early feminists like Catherine Maculay, upheld the liberal view of the irrelevance of differences between individuals, writing that: 'those vices and imperfections which have generally been regarded as inseparable from the female character, do not in any manner proceed from sexual causes, but are entirely the effects of situation and education.'<sup>67</sup>

First wave equality feminists fought to transform the oppressed position of women on the basis that differences between men and women were contingent and therefore, inconsequential. Women ultimately shared with men the same capabilities and capacities and the differences between them were simply a result of social

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<sup>63</sup> See Harriet Taylor, 'Enfranchisement of Women,' ed. Alice S. Rossi, *Essays on Sex Equality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 91-124; de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*; Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

<sup>64</sup> Anne Phillips, *Democracy and Difference* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), 43.

<sup>65</sup> For a thorough examination of the relationship between feminism and liberalism see Lisa H. Schwartzman, *Challenging Liberalism: feminism as political critique* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2007).

<sup>66</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Modern feminist thought: from the second wave to 'post-feminism,'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995).

<sup>67</sup> Catharine Maculay cited in Moira Ferguson, *First Feminist British Women Writers 1578-1799* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 402.

convention. It was on this basis that feminists like Mary Wollstonecraft<sup>68</sup> demanded equal access to education for girls and women. The main objective for early equality feminists was the issue of women's suffrage. The issue of equal rights to education and property were of secondary interest insofar as education was deemed a critical issue as it would enable women to develop the rationality that would serve as the basis for autonomy. Once women had secured their place as rational, autonomous subjects they would be equal to men and therefore, could not then be denied suffrage.

De Beauvoir encapsulates the goals of these feminists when, in *The second sex*,<sup>69</sup> she endeavours to demonstrate that the concept of woman is fabricated by a society that benefits from the subordination of women. Woman's inferior place, argues de Beauvoir, is not a result of her inferiority in some essential sense to man, but rather it is that the concepts associated with woman are fabricated by a society that benefits from woman's subordinated place in relation to man. De Beauvoir argues that given the same opportunities, woman could equal man. She also challenges the philosophical constructions of woman, but does so by working from within the system she is critiquing. Therefore, she does not suggest that the ideologies are biased because they are created by men for the purpose of privileging men.<sup>70</sup>

De Beauvoir's quest for equality between men and women is subsequently taken up by the radical feminist Shulamith Firestone<sup>71</sup> and in many senses taken to its logical conclusion.<sup>72</sup> Following de Beauvoir having located women within nature, Firestone identifies the oppression of women as located in their 'child-bearing and child-rearing role.'<sup>73</sup> Therefore, according to Firestone, the goal of feminism must be to free women of their biology. Once free of the responsibility of child-bearing and child-rearing, women would be free to participate fully and unhindered in society.

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<sup>68</sup> Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

<sup>69</sup> de Beauvoir, *The second sex*.

<sup>70</sup> Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron eds., *New French Feminisms: An Anthology* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 8.

<sup>71</sup> Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: the case for feminist revolution* (London: Woman's Press, 1970).

<sup>72</sup> See also Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (London: Virago, 1977); Germaine Greer, *The female eunuch* (London: Paladin, 1971).

<sup>73</sup> Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 73.

There are positive gains in identity politics to be understood here, namely to do with the issues of solidarity and empowerment. Solidarity allows for the possibility to work together as a unified force towards a shared goal. Up to this point, women had been both isolated and divided in both the public and the private sphere. The possibility of empowering women was seen as a desirable goal. As Papadelos points out, the political goals of equality feminism could also be fairly quickly and very visibly achieved.<sup>74</sup> For instance, a liberal (equality) feminist position that pursues women's equality in education has seen significant achievements very rapidly, in particular in the areas of work and education.<sup>75</sup>

Looking at the identity category, or subject, of 'woman' that is pursued largely by equality feminism, we see that it is predicated on a liberal conception of the subject definable as 'human' rather than male or female – masculine or feminine. Clearly, the subject of equality feminists is the liberal subject – the rational, modernist subject, the rights-bearing individual, in which differences between subjects are minimised. Yet, even early first wave feminists grappled with this subject as gender-biased. Mary Wollstonecraft was already troubled by the dilemma of difference – what Pateman has coined 'Wollstonecraft's Dilemma.'<sup>76</sup> That is, in the pursuit of full citizenship, the very early feminists grappled with the dilemma of whether or not women should take the course of fighting for the extension of existing citizenship rights enjoyed by men to them, or if they should fight for a specific and differentiated set of citizenship rights that would take account of women's specific needs, talents, etc. Are women persons just like men? Or are they different?

The subject that is invoked in an equality approach is one that is 'human' rather than masculine or feminine. The self maintains the *a priori* position just as in liberalism.

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<sup>74</sup> Pam Papadelos, *From Revolution to Deconstruction: Exploring Feminist Theory and Practice in Australia* (Bern: Peter Lang AG, International Academic Publishers, 2010).

<sup>75</sup> A recent Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) report entitled, 'Male and Female Participation and Progress in higher Education' shows that women are out achieving men in undergraduate education, although not in high status degrees (PhD's) nor degrees that result in high paid professions. (5 June 2009 online at: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/466-1409/Male-and-female-participation-and-progression-in-Higher-Education.html>, (Accessed: January 7, 2012)

<sup>76</sup> Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism, and the Welfare State*, 194-204.

The experience of being a self is not taken as the starting point for either an understanding of the self or of what sort of life the self might live. Pateman points out that the subject is marked by a patriarchal system in such a way that serves to limit and exclude women.<sup>77</sup> Unexamined, this ‘human’ subject is a masculine subject that both denies and excludes gender, racial and sexual differences. This is not to say that the pursuit of egalitarian demands to ameliorate economic and political injustices is not important to feminism. It is in the pursuit of this that questions arise to do with: What sort of subject is it that is being pursued? On what basis, and how is it possible, to mobilise women as a political group? And can this be achieved without devaluing and excluding women’s particularity? These are the issues pursued by difference feminists to which I now turn.

## Identity politics and difference feminism

Difference feminism, as the term itself implies, is complex and the task of representing it a difficult one.<sup>78</sup> Therefore, my aim here is to simply present some of its representative arguments. Difference feminism generally can be seen as an attempt to rethink the meaning of gender difference, that is, the difference between men and women. Dietz summarises this task as inhering in two related questions: Is there a coherent notion of woman that exists *a priori* to women’s interests and experience? If so, what epistemic identity is it that adheres to this subject?<sup>79</sup>

Difference feminists can be loosely characterised by the critical stance they hold in regards to the desirability and possibility for an equality agenda to address the issue of the oppression of women. Whereas up until what is referred to as the ‘post-1968’ period, feminism had largely concentrated on the issues of female suffrage, birth

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<sup>77</sup> Carole Pateman, ‘Introduction: The Theoretical Subversiveness of Feminism,’ eds. Carole Pateman and Elizabeth Gross, *Feminist Challenges* (Sydney and London: Allen and Unwin, 1988), 1-10.

<sup>78</sup> Difference feminism divides into two main schemas: social and symbolic. In what follows I engage more directly with social difference feminism since it is this type with which diversity feminism largely has engaged. Both social and symbolic feminism though share a view of gender identity as male-female difference and agree that women’s subordination exists within a social or symbolic system of gender hierarchy. Both also appeal to the feminine experience – the female body and the maternal caring role – which gives women unique knowledge. Zakin points out that these two difference feminisms need not be incommensurable, although they rarely overlap in feminist theory. See Emily Zakin, ‘Bridging the social and the symbolic: toward a feminist politics of sexual difference,’ *Hypatia* Volume 15, Issue 3 (Summer 2000), 19–44.

<sup>79</sup> Dietz, ‘Current Controversies in Feminist Theory,’ 6.

control and women's emancipation more generally, 'post-1968' a number of feminists began to challenge the marginalisation of women's perspectives as mothers and carers.<sup>80</sup> Where first wave feminists embraced liberalism's universality by and large unquestioningly, many second wave feminists began to focus on the possibility that liberalism's universality functions in a way that actually requires the exclusion of particularity of a certain kind. Feminists like Pateman note that liberalism overlooks that the 'unencumbered self' of liberalism results in women and children being cast either as deviant (different) cases, or their interdependence simply ignored.<sup>81</sup> Liberalism's failure to reflect women's particularity gives rise to the notion that what constitutes a person in the proper sense (i.e. in who matters and can act morally) is actually a representation of men's lives. Thus, the individual at the heart of liberalism rather than being human, is the male head of house.<sup>82</sup> Therefore, leaving the self of liberalism untouched by matters of identity becomes a matter of urgent contestation for difference feminism.

Despite a multiplicity of approaches that seek to explain the failure of equality, what all difference feminists hold in common is a conviction that the modern notion of the liberal subject is masculine rather than universally human. It is on this basis that Young contends that the liberal subject is 'marked' by a patriarchal society in which what is feminine or female is excluded.<sup>83</sup> The liberal conception of the individual, excluding as it does the perspective of all but the dominant group, has politically significant consequences for women. According to Young, societies are made up of different groups that are based on and around differing experiences, histories and perspectives and no one group can stand in and speak for, or represent, adequately any other group. In the face of such diversity, Young argues, the seemingly neutral standards of liberalism are merely a reflection of the experiences of white middle class males. Women and other marginalised groups are prevented from defining liberal standards:

<sup>80</sup> Dani Cavallero, *French Feminist Theory: an introduction* (London: Continuum, 2003), 68-69.

<sup>81</sup> Pateman, 'Introduction: The Theoretical Subversiveness of Feminism,' 1-10.

<sup>82</sup> Indeed, as is often noted, Rawls was still imagining the actor of his social contract as a male head of house as late as the 1970's.

<sup>83</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,' *Ethics*, Volume 99, Number 2 (January 1989).



A general perspective does not exist which all persons can adopt and from which all experiences and perspectives can be understood and taken into account. The existence of social groups implies different, though not necessarily exclusive, histories, experiences and perspectives on social life that people have, and it implies that they do not entirely understand the experience of other groups. No one can claim to speak in the general interest, because no one of the groups can speak for another.<sup>84</sup>

By way of attacking this ‘general perspective’ and the subject, as well as the oppressive forms of social arrangements that accompany it, difference feminists look to women’s experience. This is the approach pursued by Carol Gilligan.<sup>85</sup> Critiquing Kohlberg’s scale of moral development, Gilligan argues that women tend more than men to define themselves in terms of relationships and therefore, they experience an identity that is marked by connection and empathy. Furthermore, men are only able to sustain their own identity of separation and independence due, in part, to women taking on the responsibility for sociality. It is because of this that the strategies women bring to bear on moral problems focus on the conflict of multiple responsibilities, rather than the strategies men bring to bear, which have to do with the weighing up of competing rights.

Gilligan’s project, in relation to the revaluation of women’s identity and particularity, can be seen as having a twofold aim. Firstly, it is Gilligan’s intention to rescue women’s way of knowing and doing from the devaluation to which it is subjected when measured from the male point of view (Kohlberg’s model of moral development). Secondly, Gilligan aims to revise the male point of view by offering a picture of moral maturity that is a combination of male concerns for rights and female concerns for attention to other’s needs. What Gilligan does not do is actually abandon Kohlberg’s model, which she never specifies as wrong, but rather as incomplete.

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<sup>84</sup> Young, ‘Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship,’ 262-263.

<sup>85</sup> Gilligan, *In a Different Voice*.

Hartsock makes a similar critique, albeit one that situates Gilligan's different voice in the political economy of the gendered division of labour.<sup>86</sup> Whereas Gilligan leaves the elaboration of the collective dimension of her shift in moral judgment unelaborated, Hartsock focuses on the relation between forms of power and community. Hartsock's main point is to reveal the underlying identity of the subject of capitalism as male and masculine. This male subject is premised on autonomy, isolation and competing interests. Any association between subjects is strictly voluntary and instrumental. The vision of community, such as it is, is one that is Hobbesian in that it is 'arbitrary and fragile, structured fundamentally by competition and domination.'<sup>87</sup>

In counterpoint to the male subject, Hartsock posits a feminist standpoint that puts forward a particularised female identity grounded in connection and relational knowledge rather than separation and abstract reason. The 'double aspect' of 'women's lives makes a particular and privileged vantage point on male supremacy' possible.<sup>88</sup> The main task of feminism, according to Hartsock, is to revalue the female experience and to search for 'common threads which connect the diverse experiences of women' and to articulate a feminist standpoint that 'offers the possibility of a fully human community' based on an analysis of women's knowledge claims.<sup>89</sup>

In constructing her feminist standpoint, Hartsock takes up the analysis of power, *eros* and community from the epistemic perspective of women's experience. Hartsock reformulates sexuality under the broader term of *eros*, in which she also includes: union with another, bodily pleasure, creativity and purposeful activity.<sup>90</sup> She distinguishes the death-oriented masculine form of *eros* from the life-affirming *eros* that is achievable through a feminist standpoint. It is in the life-affirming *eros*,

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<sup>86</sup> Nancy C. M. Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism* (New York: Longman, 1983).

<sup>87</sup> Hartsock, *Money, Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*, 38.

<sup>88</sup> Nancy Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*, (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1996), 107.

<sup>89</sup> Nancy Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint,' ed. Linda Nicholson, *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory* (London: Routledge, 1997), 234

<sup>90</sup> Hartsock, *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays*, 166.

made possible by a feminist standpoint, that Hartsock develops an alternative tradition that can be tied to life-affirming connections between individuals who are able to act together towards shared, rather than conflicting ends. Rather than a model of power as coercion, Hartsock develops a model of power as empowerment and as a task of working together towards common goals. In this way Hartsock locates women's experiences in what they *do* rather than in what they *are*.<sup>91</sup> Hartsock, thus, accounts for the collective dimension of difference feminism, something Gilligan neglects, by putting forward the liberated perspective as one that women as a group must struggle for.

Yet, where Gilligan and Hartsock differ, Ferguson notes that there is still a shared epistemological manoeuvre.<sup>92</sup> Both Gilligan and Hartsock present a configuration in which men and women as respective groups exist within those groups as unified and universal categories – *as* men, or *as* women. Representation of men as a unified group, and women as a unified group, carries an implicit epistemology, the aim of which is to access a nature, or social reality, that is true for all women and, as Dietz notes, 'raises the question of exclusion, and ignites the identity crisis within feminist theory.'<sup>93</sup> Therefore, while accounts of difference feminism, like those of Gilligan and Hartsock, succeed in exposing the pervasive liberal model of the 'universal human' as modelled after the white male, they, at the same time, reify the very essentialist tendencies of liberalism that they aim to critique by arguing that there exists a universal female self that must be uncovered, rediscovered, nurtured and embraced. It is only on this basis that women are able to act as a group for political purposes.

This is exemplified in the approach taken by the Northern Irish feminist movement in the 1970's and the dilemmas they subsequently faced. Attempts were made in Northern Ireland, beginning in the 1970's, to form a unified women's movement, which would focus its priorities on gender over any other aspects of identity. It was

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<sup>91</sup> Hartsock, 'The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism,' 237.

<sup>92</sup> Kathy E. Ferguson 'Review Essay: Knowledge, Politics, and Persons in Feminist Theory,' *Political Theory*, Volume 17, Number 2 (May 1989), 302-14.

<sup>93</sup> Dietz, 'Current Controversies in Feminist Theory,' 408.

on this basis that the Northern Ireland Women's Rights Movement (NIWRM) was founded in 1975 by women from civil rights, trade unions, and broad left backgrounds. Its main concern was the considerable levels of disadvantage faced by women as women and thus, it campaigned for equal pay and an end to sex discrimination.<sup>94</sup> In its fight to extend Britain's Sex Discrimination Act, it was successful. In 1976 the Act was introduced in Northern Ireland and an Equal Opportunities Commission was established.

### *The Northern Irish Women's Rights Movement (NIWRM)*

Although the NIWRM cannot be assigned to the purely difference feminist axis, it did focus very clearly on gender as a universal category that mattered to women's subordinate position in society. In its campaigns, the NIWRM stressed that attaining equality for women vis-à-vis men worked best by de-emphasising differences between women. In order to overturn the oppression of a universally shared gender category (women), the NIWRM's view was that it was necessary for women to abstract themselves from other oppressions, which were best addressed in other contexts. Taking the same approach that the trade unions had, the NIWRM asked its members to leave their commitment to nationalism or unionism or whatever 'at the door' and focus upon 'women's issues.'<sup>95</sup>

Asking members to leave their unionist and nationalist convictions 'at the door' though did not completely rid the awareness that these 'other identities' related to privilege and disadvantage among women.<sup>96</sup> Efforts to minimize differences in order to create a feminist solidarity based on sameness resulted in a denial of differences which ultimately led to numerous splits and fragmentations. The Socialist Women's Group (SWG) for instance, criticized the NIWRM's approach to forming a unified movement as achieving little more than a false unity because it failed to challenge prejudices and sectarianism. Indeed, efforts to forge a united front on feminist

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<sup>94</sup> Carmel Roulston, 'Engendering Devolution,' John Wilson and Karyn Stapleton (Eds), *Devolution and Identity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 145.

<sup>95</sup> Carmel Roulston, 'Women on the Margin: The Women's Movement in Northern Ireland, 1973-1995,' Lois A. West (ed) *Feminist Nationalism* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), 48.

<sup>96</sup> Roulston, 'Engendering Devolution,' 146.

activity by remaining neutral on the national question were fraught and were pushed to the fore when Armagh women Republican prisoners joined the male prison protest for prisoner political status by refusing to work and finally, joining the ‘no wash’ campaign.<sup>97</sup> The campaign placed pressure on the NIWRM to support the Armagh women prisoners. Nell McCafferty captured the dilemma facing feminist organisations when she wrote in graphic detail in the *Irish Times*: ‘the smell of menstrual blood on the walls of Armagh prison smells to high heaven. Shall we turn our noses up?’<sup>98</sup>

Women Against Imperialism (WAI) broke away from the NIWRM and was formed in 1977, led by the prominent feminist Republican activist Bernadette Devlin (later McAliskey), in order to protest the mistreatment of Republican prisoners at Armagh as well as to publicise the link between British occupation and the oppression of women. The NIWRM, however, took the view that they would not support the women prisoners because Armagh was not a feminist issue. NIWRM’s position was in keeping with their strategy of seeking to unite women across the sectarian divide. As one member is quoted as saying:

By calling a demonstration outside Armagh prison on International Women’s Day, [Women Against Imperialism]<sup>99</sup> linked it [the demonstration] with feminism and women’s rights..... We could have called a meeting where.....it would have caused a major split in the organization and for what purpose? ....We could still have come out in our own organisations on the policies which we wanted to, rather than split this organization which at that point in time was trying to unite women.<sup>100</sup>

The NIWRM avoided a schism by avoiding the Nationalist question. On the basis that the Armagh women prisoners were Republicans, imprisoned for ‘terrorist’

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<sup>97</sup> For a full account of the women’s prison protest in Armagh see: Christina Loughran, ‘Armagh and Feminist Strategy: Campaigns around Republican Women Prisoners in Armagh Jail,’ *Feminist Review*, No. 23 (Summer 1986): 59-79.

<sup>98</sup> Quoted in Loughran, ‘Armagh and Feminist Strategy: Campaigns around Republican Women Prisoners in Armagh Jail,’ 64.

<sup>99</sup> Women Against Imperialism (WAI) was a small group of Republican and anti-imperialist left-wing women based in Belfast and Derry, and organised the first pickets outside of Armagh for feminists.

<sup>100</sup> Loughran, ‘Armagh and Feminist Strategy: Campaigns around Republican Women Prisoners in Armagh Jail,’ 72.

offences, the NIWRM maintained that Armagh was a sectarian and not a feminist issue and thus one that would only divide women. Unity turned out to be disingenuous as many of its members argued elsewhere that the Armagh women ‘were aping tactics of their male counterparts in Long Kesh.’<sup>101</sup> And, because Republican women prisoners refused to associate with other prisoners, it was asserted that ‘so much for pioneering prison reform. Armagh like Kesh is all about status, elitism and privilege.’<sup>102</sup>

Armagh served to further entrench the conviction of feminist collectivities like the NIWRM that ignoring the National Question for the goal of achieving some shred of women’s unity was a realistic and necessary strategy. This idea was tested in so-called ‘unity’ meetings to see what issues could be agreed upon – action on debt, rape and cuts to social services. These ‘unity’ meetings were initially attended by all feminists. Very quickly though, conflict and disagreement over the National Question resurfaced, and those feminists most closely identified with the Armagh campaigns ceased attending. Indeed, this is what led to the formation of new groups such as the Belfast Women’s Collective and WAI.<sup>103</sup>

What the case of Armagh makes clear is that the largest stumbling block to a politics based on identity as sameness (women uniformly different from men), is that in its focus on a fairer distribution rather than a politics of transformation and change, identities that are secured in direct opposition to one another (i.e. Republican/Nationalist, Protestant/Catholic) are accepted as inevitable hostilities between such groups. I am agreeing with Phillips who argues that competing groups end up securing their equality ‘behind ever higher barriers of mutual distrust.’<sup>104</sup> Equality in both power and resources can only ever be part of the answer. This must be combined with a more engaged approach to politics that works at enhancing communication between differing groups. If this latterly work is not undertaken, or is

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<sup>101</sup> Loughran, ‘Armagh and Feminist Strategy: Campaigns around Republican Women Prisoners in Armagh Jail,’ 72.

<sup>102</sup> Loughran, ‘Armagh and Feminist Strategy: Campaigns around Republican Women Prisoners in Armagh Jail,’ 72.

<sup>103</sup> Linda Connolly, ‘Feminist Politics and the Peace Process,’ *Capital & Class* (1999), Vol. 23: 145-159.

<sup>104</sup> Phillips, *Democracy and Difference*, 18-19.

‘left at the door,’ individuals end up entrenching themselves behind barriers of mutual resentment. The NIWRM, by barring members their different identities, could not undertake the transformative work that is necessary in order to work together.

Young’s discussion of communicative democracy is helpful here. She notes that it is the task of communicative democracy to move beyond ‘difference’ and to ‘locate or create common interests that all can share,’ which is exactly what the NIWRM’s aim was.<sup>105</sup> However, Young cautions that:

[w]hen discussion participants aim at unity, in the appeal to a common ground in which they are all supposed to leave behind their particular experience and interests, the perspectives of the privileged are likely to dominate the definition of that common good. The less privileged are asked to put aside the expression of their experience, which may require a different idiom, or their claims of entitlement or interest must be put aside for the sake of a common good whose definition is biased against them.<sup>106</sup>

In Northern Ireland, feminists like those in the NIWRM, seeking to mobilise women on the basis of a shared gender identity, faced the same problems that other second wave feminists did. On closer inspection, the ‘unencumbered,’ universal subject of liberal democracy, turned out to be full of concealed masculinities as well as the situated privileges of class, race, etc. In the process of trying to embody this neutral subject with femininities, along came the situated experiences of Protestant, unionist, loyalist, Catholic, etc.

In summary, identity politics, as it is expressed in difference feminism, holds that group membership is predicated on some feature, or experience, that members share in common. This shared feature, or experience, is what is held to constitute identity. Identitarian logic construes this as follows: the feature of sex gives fundamental shape to my experience and shapes the experience of others who have this feature in

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<sup>105</sup> Iris Marion Young, ‘Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,’ Seyla Benhabib (ed), *Democracy and Difference: contesting the boundaries of the political*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 126.

<sup>106</sup> Young, ‘Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,’ 126.

similar ways. For instance, in a sexist society, all women are at risk of sex discrimination. Therefore, the shared feature of sex leads to the shared (oppressive) experience of sexism which results in a shared identity. The self here discovers an identity category to which she belongs. So, although Hartsock helpfully raises the issue of the collective work that must be undertaken to achieve common political goals in feminism, she does so on the basis of a universally shared gender identity. The universality of a shared identity must first be discovered by a woman and *then* women can work together.

In seeking to politicise identity, identity politics as gender difference operates according to identitarian logic in which the ‘differently similar’ is reduced to the ‘same.’<sup>107</sup> That is, beneath differences, unity is uncovered, or discovered. It is in this sameness that a shared politics is found: ‘we have an identity and *therefore* a politics’ (my italics).<sup>108</sup> Identity is prior to, and therefore, is the ground of politics. To quote Fraser: ‘All therefore were sisters under the skin.’<sup>109</sup> By locating identity prior to politics, the liberal positioning of the subject as prior to the right and the good is left intact. Identification is made by the self to a universal category, as well as to the other on the basis of similarity. On the basis of this similarity, political projects are undertaken. But what if, as the NIWRM example emphasizes, we are not all ‘sisters under the skin’? What if other identities ‘under the skin’ are suffered as a relation to other identities? What if we do not all identify with the same universal category? What if we identify differentially to the same universal category? As the NIWRM case in relation to Omargh points towards, there is no escaping differences between women. On what basis and how then are we to undertake the hard work that is necessary to maintain political bonds in these circumstances? These were the questions raised by diversity feminists to which I now turn.

<sup>107</sup> Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton, N.J. ; Oxford : Princeton University Press, 1990), 99.

<sup>108</sup> Barbara Smith quoted in Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1989), 99.

<sup>109</sup> Fraser, ‘Multiculturalism and Gender Equity: The U.S. Difference Debates Revisited,’ 63.



## Identity politics and diversity feminism

By the 1980's 'gender difference' feminism had given way to a focus on the differences between women. This shift in focus came largely from the work of feminists of colour and feminist lesbians who argued that feminism did not reflect their lives and therefore, failed to address their problems. For these feminists, the 'gender difference' approach merely served to replicate the essentialist fixing of the concept of identity it sought to destabilise and created a hierarchy within the category of women. Not only did difference feminism essentialise women's characteristics, it also ignored or erased differences between women.

Feminists critiquing mainstream difference approaches on the basis of a neglect of the race issue, like bell hooks,<sup>110</sup> pointed to the failure of conceptions of 'woman's' identity premised on gender difference, to deal with issues like race, class and sexual orientation. Such approaches were viewed as essentialising white middle-class women's traits. For instance, hooks criticises Betty Friedan for ignoring 'the existence of all non-white women and poor white women.'<sup>111</sup> The Combahee River Collective similarly took issue with the second wave idea that women were 'all sisters under the skin.'<sup>112</sup> The Combahee River Collective identifies itself as 'Black feminists,'<sup>113</sup> signalling from the start its difference from mainstream essentialist feminism as being at the level of the skin: 'As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face [sic]'.<sup>114</sup> Second wave white feminists, by locating the problematic and solution to women's oppression as lurking 'under the skin,' neglected the oppression suffered by non-white women at the level of the skin.

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<sup>110</sup> Although I am invoking hooks here as an example of diversity feminism, it is important not to overlook that she is also postmodernist.

<sup>111</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 9.

<sup>112</sup> Fraser, 'Multiculturalism and Gender Equity: The U.S. Difference Debates Revisited,' 63.

<sup>113</sup> The Statement opens with the sentence: 'We are a group of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974' and ends with: 'As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.' See Combahee River Collective, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement' ed. Barbara Smith, *Home girls: a Black feminist anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table – Women of Color Press, 1983), 264.

<sup>114</sup> Combahee River Collective, 'The Combahee River Collective Statement,' 264.

In the United States, Latina, Jewish and Native-American, and Asian-American feminists were also critiquing the implicit reference to white Anglo women that mainstream feminist texts like Friedan's were making.<sup>115</sup> Lesbian feminists as well were contributing to the realisation that the classic feminist accounts of those like Chodorow and Gilligan on motherhood, sexuality and reproduction assumed a normative heterosexuality.<sup>116</sup>

What all of these critiques of the mainstream difference feminism hold in common is an insistence that the feminism on offer was not one that gave an account of all women. Instead, it offered an account that privileged the standpoint of the white, Anglo, heterosexual, middle class women who dominated the movement and extrapolated from this. In this way, the mainstream women's movement, that claimed to liberate women, merely ended up replicating, from within, racism and heterosexism, classism and ethnic hierarchies. hooks summarises this critique succinctly:

White women who dominate feminist discourse, who for the most part make and articulate feminist theory, have little or no understanding of white supremacy as a racial politic, of the psychological impact of class, of their political status within a racist, sexist and capitalist state.<sup>117</sup>

Both equality feminism and difference feminism are guilty of overlooking the significant differences between women. hooks marks a significant shift in the feminist debate from a focus on 'gender differences' to a focus on 'differences

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<sup>115</sup> See Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983); Audre Lourde, *Sister/Outsider* (Freedom, CA: Crossing, 1984); Trinh T. Min-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Gloria Anzaldua, Ana Louise Keating eds., *This Bridge We Call Home: Radical Visions for Transformation* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, Barbara Smith eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (Old Westbury, NY: Feminist, 1982); Barbara Smith ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table, Women of Color Press, 1983).

<sup>116</sup> See for instance Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, P. Owen trans. (New York: Avon, 1976); Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature and Difference*; Shane Phelan, *Identity Politics: Lesbian Feminism and the Limits of Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989); Claudia Card, *Lesbian Choices* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

<sup>117</sup> hooks, *Feminist Theory: from the margin to the center*, 4.

among women.’<sup>118</sup> With diversity feminism, identity politics in feminism then becomes a matter of asserting and inserting the differences, not only between men and women, but *between* women. Diversity feminists press demands on the contemporary women’s movement calling for recognition and respect for the differences *between* women.<sup>119</sup>

Collins’ ‘Afrocentric feminist epistemology’ and ‘Black women’s standpoint’ exemplifies a systematic attempt to attend to the implicit racial bias of mainstream second wave feminism.<sup>120</sup> Collins’ project is worth looking at more closely since it exemplifies many of the main issues attendant to the diversity approach of identity.

### *Collins’ ‘Black women’s standpoint’*

In her 1989 *Signs* article, Collins develops a ‘Black women’s standpoint’<sup>121</sup> which is to serve as the basis for ‘Black feminist thought.’<sup>122</sup> Collins argues that ‘Black women’ have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression and that this standpoint is distinctive from ‘those who are not Black and female.’<sup>123</sup> This distinctive standpoint intersects with an Afrocentric epistemology as well as feminist standpoint theory, both of which emerge out of the concrete experience of oppression. Collins puts it this way:

...as a result of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid, and other systems of racial domination, Blacks share a common experience of oppression. These similarities in material conditions have fostered shared Afrocentric values that permeate the family structure, religious institutions, culture, and community life of Blacks in various parts of Africa, the Caribbean, South America, and North America.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Fraser, ‘Multiculturalism and Gender Equity: The U.S. ‘Difference’ Debates Revisited,’ 66.

<sup>119</sup> See for instance Lourde, *Sister/Outsider*; Anzaldúa and Keating, *This Bridge We Call Home*; Trinh T. Min-Ha, *Woman, native, other: writing postcoloniality and feminism*.

<sup>120</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: knowledge, consciousness and the politics of empowerment* (New York; London: Routledge, 1991), 219.

<sup>121</sup> Collins’ ‘Black women’s standpoint’ is very similar to Kimberle Crenshaw’s ‘intersectional identities’ developed in her article: ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.’

<sup>122</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, ‘The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,’ *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Volume 14, Number 4 (1989), 746.

<sup>123</sup> Collins, ‘The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,’ 747.

<sup>124</sup> Collins, ‘The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,’ 755.

According to Collins, feminist scholars advance a similar argument, viewing women as sharing a history of ‘patriarchal oppression through the political economy of the material conditions of sexuality and reproduction.’<sup>125</sup> These shared material conditions serve to unify women, transcending as they do any differences between women (race, class, religion, etc.). These same conditions also form the basis for a feminist epistemology.

Black women though straddle both the Afrocentric and the feminist standpoints and it is from this straddled position that Black women articulate their own unique, alternative standpoint. Since Black women have access to both Afrocentric and feminist standpoints, their own standpoint reflects elements from both traditions. Yet Collins resists the implication that a ‘Black women’s standpoint’ is merely a combination of Afrocentric and female values. Instead, she insists that whilst a Black women’s epistemology will be reflective of both Blacks as a group and women as a group, there are features that are unique to Black women as a group.

Having established a ‘Black women’s standpoint’ as a corrective to mainstream feminism’s latent essentialism, Collins herself soon falters on similar grounds. Although she acknowledges the importance of the intersecting divisions of class, Collins is only unevenly able to keep class as a variable in her standpoint theory. She sometimes presents all white women as middle class and all black women as working class. This is apparent in her account of working class black women commenting on the lives of white women:

Since I have to work, I don’t really have to worry about most of the things that most of the white women I have worked for are worrying about. And if these women did their own work, they would think just like I do.<sup>126</sup>

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<sup>125</sup> Collins, ‘The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,’ 756.

<sup>126</sup> Collins, ‘The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,’ 749.

Collins omits from this account and others like it, the positions of middle class black women and working class white women.<sup>127</sup> Collins positions all white women as having class privilege, although she recognises that some black women have achieved middle class status. She even admits that black women cannot therefore share a uniform Black feminist epistemology, yet in the end she still insists that a Black feminist standpoint can yield 'objective truths.'<sup>128</sup>

Collins is successful in critiquing the racial bias of the identity of the subject in mainstream feminist theory. Her aim though is not to expand the unified category of mainstream difference feminism, rather it is to create a new and separate category for 'Black women' because the universal category of 'woman,' she maintains, is actually 'white.' Just as difference feminists had found that the universal liberal subject was male and masculine, Collins is arguing that the universal category of woman advanced by difference feminists is 'white' female and feminine. It is this point that is often overlooked in the identity politics debate in feminism. That is, the debate is one that is posited as having reached a crisis point in the matter of the identity of woman as a matter of category.

Diversity feminism has been blamed for diversifying the identity of woman to the extent that there is no universal category of woman to be shared by all women, and therefore, there is no basis for unification and political action. But what we see in Collins is not a project that aims at diversification of the universal identity category of 'woman,' but rather the creation of a new and separate category for 'Black women.' Collins is not arguing that difference feminism needs to add in the race of 'Black women' (and stir), but that 'Black women' have their *own* identity category that is separate from other identity categories - for example, a universal identity category of 'woman,' which is 'white.' The crisis here, I want to suggest, is not one that can be rearticulated as a crisis of identity *per se*, but of how Collins' 'Black women' might work together collectively with other mainstream, or other

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<sup>127</sup> See E. Francis White, 'Africa on My Mind: Gender, Counter Discourse and African-American Nationalism,' *Journal of Women's History* Volume 2, Number 1 (Spring 1990), 73-97.

<sup>128</sup> Collins, 'The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought,' 773.

differentiated feminists. That is, how can feminists work across and from positions of difference without erasing those differences?

### *Diversity and the 'SlutWalk'*

Movements like 'the SlutWalk' exemplify this on-going, real and visceral issue around diversity in feminism. SlutWalk originated in Toronto, Canada on April 13, 2011 as a protest march in response to the statement made by a Toronto police officer at a sexual assault prevention lecture. The officer advised women that if they wanted to be safe from rape, they should 'avoid dressing like sluts in order not to be victimised.'<sup>129</sup> The initial protest march soon expanded into a global movement that is against any explanation of rape in reference to how a woman dresses. The main aim of the movement is to change the existing rape culture, which blames women for rape.

Organised as a movement within which diverse women speak with one, unified voice though has not been accepted by all women's groups as is exemplified in this recent statement made by the Crunk Feminist Collective:<sup>130</sup>

What becomes an issue is those white women and liberal feminist women of colour who argue that 'slut' is a universal category of female experience, irrespective of race. I recognize that there are many women of color who are participating in the SW movement, and I support those sisters who do, particularly women who are doing it in solidarity and coalition. But rather than forcing white women to get on the diversity train with regard to the inclusivity of SlutWalk, perhaps we need to redirect our racial vigilance. By that I mean, I'd prefer that white women acknowledge that they are in fact organizing around a problematic use of terminology endemic to white communities and cultures.<sup>131</sup>

The Crunk Feminist Collective is taking exception to the word 'slut.' They argue that the term holds different associations for Black women than it does for white

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<sup>129</sup> See CBC News, 'Toronto 'slut walk' takes to city streets,' April 4, 2011 (<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/toronto/story/2011/04/03/slut-walk-toronto.html>)

<sup>130</sup> Most of this debate has taken place over the internet blog to blog.

<sup>131</sup> The Crunk Feminist Collective, 'Slut Walks vs. Ho Strolls' May 23, 2011 (<http://tinyurl.com/3d3xftn>)

women, ones that are situated in a history of slavery, immigration and racist representations. For Black American women, the term ‘slut’ cannot be rescued from the particular history within which it is embedded. The Black Women’s Blueprint similarly expressed these sentiments in their ‘Open Letter from Black Women to Slutwalk’<sup>132</sup> in 2011:

As Black women, we do not have the privilege or the space to call ourselves ‘slut’ without validating the already historically entrenched ideology and recurring messages about what and who the Black woman is. We don’t have the privilege to play on destructive representations burned in our collective minds, on our bodies and souls for generations.<sup>133</sup>

In a manner similar to Collins, groups like the Crunk Feminist Collective and the Black Women’s Blueprint argue that it is not only not productive to diversify a mainstream category of woman to simply include the issue of race, but it is destructive to ‘Black women.’ Rather, ‘Black women’ occupy a different and separate category than the one occupied by ‘white women.’<sup>134</sup> Therefore, ‘Black women’ and ‘white women’ cannot work together on the basis of a shared essential identity – ‘woman.’ As it was for Collins, the problem of collective political undertakings, according to the Crunk Collective, is not exclusion from the ‘universal category of woman,’ rather it is that the universal category is not appropriate for ‘Black women.’

The Crunk Feminist Collective does not completely rule out the possibility that ‘Black women’ might work together with ‘white women.’ The two groups might be able to work together across difference on a coalitional basis though not as a unified group since ‘different histories necessitate different strategies.’<sup>135</sup> The Crunk Feminist Collective sees such work as possible only ‘if white women could recognize SlutWalk as being rooted in white female experience, it would provide an

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<sup>132</sup> Black Women’s Blueprint, ‘Open Letter from Black Women to Slutwalk,’ September 23, 2011 (<http://www.blackwomensblueprint.org/2011/09/23/an-open-letter-from-black-women-to-the-slutwalk/>)

<sup>133</sup> Black Women’s Blueprint, ‘Open Letter from Black Women to Slutwalk.’

<sup>134</sup> I maintain the double quotation marks around ‘Black women’ and ‘white women’ to indicate I am using the terms in the sense that Collins does.

<sup>135</sup> The Crunk Feminist Collective, ‘Slut Walks vs. Ho Strolls.’

opportunity for them to participate in coalition and solidarity with similar movements that are inclusive and reflective of the experiences of women of color.’<sup>136</sup> That is, by invoking the term ‘slut’ as the universal identity term around which to organise, the movement Slutwalk fails to capture the complexity and difference of the identity of ‘Black women’ thus failing ultimately to address the specific issues ‘Black women’ suffer around ‘rape culture.’ It is necessary to recognize that there is no single, unified feminist standpoint that is shared between ‘Black’ and ‘white’ women. In order for the two groups to be able to work together, the painful history of relations between them must be recognized and worked on.

Haraway moves in this direction and offers some elaboration on how this sort of work might be undertaken. Although she takes a somewhat different approach to Collins in her rejection of any notion of a single, unified feminist standpoint, she comes to a very similar conclusion.<sup>137</sup> Haraway begins by critiquing theories like Mackinnon’s that purport to espouse a radical theory of a universal feminine experience. According to Haraway such a standpoint brings about the ‘unintended erasure of polyvocal, inassimilable, radical differences.’<sup>138</sup> Yet, Haraway does not dispose of the category of women’s experience. Instead, she reconsiders it as a way of redefining the exclusive boundaries between nature and culture. Through the notion of a consciously constructed ‘political kinship,’<sup>139</sup> Haraway redefines women’s experience within a global context that is able to account for the differences of race, gender and class in a way that is not essentialist or oppressive.<sup>140</sup> Feminists, she writes, need to:

<sup>136</sup> The Crunk Feminist Collective, ‘Slut Walks vs. Ho Strolls,’

<sup>137</sup> Haraway is very often classified within feminist theory as a postmodernist, but her own position is ‘hybrid’ derived as it is from ‘the socialist end of the feminist spectrum, propagates a feminist standpoint, listens to criticisms of women who differ, learns from postmodernism without being convinced....and insists still on the possibility of objective but situated knowledge.’ See Richard Peet, *Modern Geographical Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1998), 269.

<sup>138</sup> Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge 1991), 201.

<sup>139</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 156.

<sup>140</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 156.



...self-consciously construct a space that cannot affirm the capacity to act on the basis of natural identification, but only on the basis of conscious coalition, of affinity, of political kinship.<sup>141</sup>

Haraway is clearly privileging coalitions based on alliance, rather than a natural, essential identity. Her 'cyborg' feminist politics is based on 'affinity' and not a pure, unified, originary identity.<sup>142</sup> Groups come together, not because of some pre-existing or 'natural' wholeness that is shared, but because they are 'imperfectly stitched together' as incomplete, differently situated selves.<sup>143</sup> 'Affinity groups' will recognise that the negotiation of difference will have to form an integral part of their politics.<sup>144</sup>

Haraway defines 'affinities' in the language of choice, as 'related not by blood, but by choice.'<sup>145</sup> Whilst Marsden reads this as implying the adoption of decisionist vocabulary and a transcendental notion of agency,<sup>146</sup> Gedalof argues against this conclusion.<sup>147</sup> Gedalof points out that Haraway clearly rejects any definition of choice as framed within the terms of a 'liberal epistemology and politics that posits an autonomous human agency outside of its social location.'<sup>148</sup> Instead, Gedalof views Haraway as making the distinction between 'by blood' and 'by choice' because the latter is trying to emphasise the point that feminist unity is an often very difficult *achievement* which involves choices that have consequences. Unity is not available as a *resource* in the sense that it could be chosen. Rather, unity is something that has to be worked for and can only be understood as an *achievement*, which is what the Crunk Feminist Collective is suggesting as the only way possible for 'Black women' to work together with 'white women.'

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<sup>141</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 156.

<sup>142</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 156.

<sup>143</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 156.

<sup>144</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 156.

<sup>145</sup> Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, 155.

<sup>146</sup> Jill Marsden, 'Virtual Sexes and Feminist Futures: The Philosophy of 'Cyberfeminism,' *Radical Philosophy*, Volume 78 (1996), 6-16.

<sup>147</sup> Irene Gedalof, *Against purity: rethinking identity with Indian and Western feminisms* (London, New York: Routledge, 1999), 153-154.

<sup>148</sup> Gedalof, *Against purity*, 153-154.

In summary, although there are a plurality of approaches to diversity feminism, there are some key features that all share. Firstly, all approaches emphasise the differences *between* women, thus rejecting any notion of a universal group and singular identity category for women *as* women. Secondly, all place emphasis on an ethnically, racially, sexualised, classed, etc. situated female subjectivity. And finally, all view the main task of feminist politics to be that of bringing into focus and politicising *all* those identities that are dismissed or oppressed – not only the identity of woman vis-à-vis man. What accounts like those of Collins and Haraway point towards is that the crisis for feminism is not that race, sexuality or ethnicity need to be added in to a universally presumed category of woman, but that, in having raised the issue of diversity, attention needs to be shifted to how it is that women of diverse standpoints might come together to work towards common goals. Can it be on the basis of a universally shared identity as women? This would not seem to be possible. How might, for instance, ‘white women’ working on the issue of women’s safety in the Slutwalk movement work together with the ‘Black women’ of the Crunk Feminist Collective? What begins to emerge here is the strong suggestion that there is hard work that needs to be undertaken if feminists occupying differing identity positions are to work together on collective projects. And that this hard work has to do with how individuals are positioned unequally in relation to each other.

Whilst the intent is to diversify the range of possible articulations of women’s identity, it also casts doubt on the very notion of a common female identity. Complicating the notion of a universal woman highlights the complexity of its constituents. Each of the complicating categories of black, lesbian, immigrant are themselves further complicated (think of Collins’ class issue), each no more unified than the category of ‘woman.’ This debate aims to alter the liberal subject so that sexual and racial differences are illuminated. It seeks to rework or reconstruct the subject, but not to abandon it. The subject still stands, but now reflective of gender, racial and sexual differences. The subject of difference and diversity feminism is still premised on what is universal in identity. The universal of identity that serves to unite the group is based on what one is born into – be it a set of (constructed) social, racial or gendered categories. It is these categories that equip the subject with the

knowledge about what it ‘means to be the creature whose identity is bounded by those categories.’<sup>149</sup>

By the 1990’s a new intellectual articulation of feminism was emerging, which profoundly reflected the doubt of the viability of a unified concept of women: postmodernism. The issues raised by diversity feminists are central to postmodern feminists. Both difference feminism and diversity feminism successfully unprise the liberal self from its supposed identity-free status. This, in turn, brings about a crisis within feminism not only as to what concept of the self might replace it, but in the light of differences between woman, on what basis it is that women will be able to act (together), if not from the foundation of a unified subject. Although feminists by and large can be seen to be in agreement that the modernist subject of the Enlightenment was complicit in the inferior status of women, just what conception would replace the universal modern subject is still fiercely under debate.

Postmodernism enters and challenges the foundational idea in the women’s movement that the notion of ‘woman’ refers to a shared essence or common identity and that it is this unified identity category that serves as the basis of feminist knowledge and politics. Where equality, difference and diversity approaches to identity politics take an approach that posits a settled notion of identity as prior to politics and thus, view politics as premised on a notion of identity as settled, the postmodern approach to identity politics critiques this view for being both inaccurate and damaging. This is captured in Butler’s observation that:

The theorists of feminist identity that elaborate predicates of color, sexuality, ethnicity, class and able-bodiedness invariably close with an embarrassed ‘etc.’ at the end of the list. Through this horizontal trajectory of adjectives, these positions strive to encompass a situated subject, but invariably fail to be complete.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Laura Downs, ‘If ‘Woman’ is Just an Empty Category, Then Why Am I Afraid to Walk Alone at Night? Identity Politics Meets the Postmodern Subject,’ *Comparative Studies in Sociology and History*, Volume 35, Number 2 (1993), fn. 6.

<sup>150</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 182.

## Identity politics and postmodern feminism

Postmodern feminism is most generally understood as politicizing the very notion of identity. That is, postmodern feminism seeks to disrupt and deconstruct the unity of any notion of pre-constituted identity categories that equality, difference and diversity approaches seek to construe as paramount to, and a priori to, politics.

Although the deconstructionist<sup>151</sup> challenge to the feminist identity category of woman has an extensive literature behind it, what all of these approaches share in common is an approach to the identity category of ‘woman’ that is deconstructive.<sup>152</sup> For the purposes of this chapter, I focus on certain aspects of the work of both Wendy Brown and Judith Butler. I first look briefly at Brown’s Nietzschean critique of identity politics<sup>153</sup> which foregrounds the *experience* of the oppression of identity and the inaugural scene of pain. I then trace Butler’s Foucaultian path of identity deconstruction, which is generally taken to be the definitive feminist deconstructive attack on feminism as an identity politics.

### *Identity as ‘injury’*

One influential postmodern account of identity politics is that identity politics creates and perpetuates an understanding of identity in terms of ‘injury’ or ‘the suffering self.’<sup>154</sup> The Nietzschean concept of *ressentiment* is most often employed in

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<sup>151</sup> I do not use this term in its strict philosophical sense, tied as it is to the work of Derrida, but rather take it in a loose sense to refer to both feminist postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches.

<sup>152</sup> See Denise Riley, ‘Am I That Name?’ *Feminism and the Category of ‘Women’ in History* (Minn.: University of Minn. Press, 1988); Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*; Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law* (London, New York: Routledge 1991); Joan Scott, ‘Experience,’ eds. Judith Butler and Joan Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992); Elisabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994); Elam, *Feminism and Deconstruction*; Penelope Deutscher, *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>153</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*.

<sup>154</sup> See for instance William E. Connolly, *Politics and Ambiguity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1987); William E. Connolly, *Identity/Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Pradox* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (New York: Basic Books, 1995); Marion Tapper, ‘Ressentiment and Power,’ Paul Patton (ed) *Nietzsche, feminism and political theory* (New York: Routledge, 1993). For a critique of such accounts see Susan Bickford, ‘Anti-anti-identity politics: Feminism, democracy, and the complexities of citizenship,’ *Hypatia* (Fall 1997), Volume 12, Issue 4, 113.

formulating this argument and prompts a focus on victimhood, powerlessness, and fixation on recognition.<sup>155</sup> Brown's work is generally taken as a paradigmatic example of this sort of critique of identity politics. In her *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, Brown's central concern is with the 'exclusionary and reactionary function' of contemporary feminism, standpoint theory and identity politics, which she views as having the aim of theorising the conditions of 'political conversation among a complex and diverse 'we.''<sup>156</sup> Her main question is how to go about understanding the impulse to politics at work in feminist identity politics. In particular, she explores the way in which feminism, as a form of identity politics, can be understood as based in and driven by a Nietzschean form of *ressentiment*: '[g]iven what produced it, given what shapes and suffuses it, what does politicised identity want?'<sup>157</sup> According to Brown, the answer to this question is located within the 'complex logics of *ressentiment*.'<sup>158</sup>

Brown argues that 'politicised identity' exhibits many of the attributes of *ressentiment*, which is a critique of the source of domination on the part of the 'injured' and is based on moral reproach. Brown describes it as so:

Developing a righteous critique of power from the perspective of the injured, it delimits a specific site of blame for suffering by constituting sovereign subjects and events as responsible for the 'injury' of social subordination. It fixes identities of the injured and the injuring as social positions, and codifies as well the meanings of their actions against all possibilities of indeterminacy, ambiguity, and struggle for resignification or repositioning.<sup>159</sup>

Identity politics is rooted in the pursuit of recognition through its own history of subjection – a subjection that is predicated on 'injury.' Group identities are therefore, according to Brown, premised on their own marginalisation and this marginalization is akin to a primary 'injury.' Therefore, politicised identity is ontologically invested

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<sup>155</sup> Rebecca Stringer, 'A Nietzschean Breed': Feminism, Victimology, Ressentiment,' ed. Alan D. Schrift, *Why Nietzsche Still? Reflections on Drama, Culture and Politics*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000): 247-273.

<sup>156</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 51.

<sup>157</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 62.

<sup>158</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 66-9.

<sup>159</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 27.

in its own subjection ('injury') and because of this can only continually reiterate its own injuries of marginalisation, exclusion and oppressed subjugation.<sup>160</sup> The problem then is that any identity position cannot see itself outside of its positionality and cannot envision any futurity outside of this. This implies that paradoxically, in its attempt to empower, politicized identity actually functions only to entrench marginalization. Brown summarises this as follows:

In its emergence as a protest against marginalisation or subordination, politicised identity thus becomes attached to its own exclusion both because it is premised on this exclusion for its very existence as identity and because the formation of identity at the site of the exclusion, as exclusion, augments or "alters the direction of the suffering" entailed in subordination or marginalisation by finding a site of blame for it. But in so doing, it installs its pain over its unredeemed history in the very foundation of its political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity.....Politicised identity thus enunciates itself, makes claims for itself, only by entrenching, restating, dramatising, and inscribing its pain in politics; it can hold out no future – for itself or others – that triumphs over this pain.<sup>161</sup>

Positing the subject as victim, results in the subject as capable of nothing more than wielding 'moral reproach' against power: 'Truth is always on the side of the damned or the excluded; hence Truth is always clean of power, but therefore always positioned to reproach power.'<sup>162</sup> Consequently, according to Brown, one of the most debilitating implications of identity politics, cast in light of the logics of *ressentiment*, is that the subject is posited as morally pure, but powerless. This eliminates the possibility for democratic contestation and therefore, also the possibility of meaningful transformation. The possibility of political disagreement is precluded because the reality that all subjects are implicated in power structures is obscured, hidden from view. Furthermore, the capacity for making political judgments and the practice of dialogue across difference are both diminished.

The self is rendered powerless and incapable of interacting in the manner that would be required to transform the 'injured identity.' That is, within a framework of

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<sup>160</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 70-4.

<sup>161</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 73-4.

<sup>162</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 46.

*ressentiment* transformation becomes impossible and indeed is no longer even a goal. The *telos* of the ‘injured’ is not towards increased freedom, but rather aims only at repeating the ‘injury.’ How then does Brown propose injured identity transform? How in a context of inequality and oppression (‘injury’) are differentially placed ‘we’s’ to undertake collective political projects? How will it be possible for the self to participate in democratic communication with differentially placed others?

Brown moves to explore the possibility of Nietzsche’s ‘virtues of forgetting’ as one possible solution that would transform the painful investments that form and deform politicized identity.<sup>163</sup> Very quickly though she abandons Nietzsche, noting that it is ‘erased histories and historical invisibilities’ that are themselves elements positioned at the heart of the pain of subjugated identities.<sup>164</sup> Instead, in order for ‘the transformative possibilities of collective political invention’ to flourish, Brown proposes that the problematic of pain, embedded at the heart of politicized identity, must be given scope to be acknowledged.<sup>165</sup> The only way to do this is to configure a ‘radically democratic political culture’ that must include a space for acknowledging the pain at work in identities yet being careful not to allow this space to slide away from political discourse into therapeutic discourse. Part of this reconfiguration is premised upon ‘desire.’<sup>166</sup> This is a notion of ‘desire’ that is expressed in transforming the character and claims of politicized identity away from ‘I am’ to ‘I want this for us’: ‘This is an I want that distinguishes itself from a liberal expression of self-interest by virtue of its figuring of a political or collective good as its desire.’<sup>167</sup> This, according to Brown, is how it is possible to rescue politicised identity and establish as its *telos* a (collective) freedom. In order to actualise freedom what is required is on-going work, and this work will be a ‘frustratingly indeterminate matter of ethos...of the style of political practices.’ (9)

In summary, accounts like Brown’s that explore identity politics through the lens of *ressentiment*, argue that attachment to a political identity as the basis for motivation

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<sup>163</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 74.

<sup>164</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 74.

<sup>165</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 74.

<sup>166</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 75.

<sup>167</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 75.

for political argument is best understood as a ‘wounded attachment.’ If the identity of feminism is born in and through ‘injury,’ then the *telos* of its politics are likewise dominated by ‘suffering,’ a ‘suffering’ that, as Bell notes, is ‘owned.’<sup>168</sup> Thus, feminism cannot afford to cast aside the *ressentiment* that is at work in politicized identity, but must engage with its challenges. By articulating politicized identities as ‘injured states,’ Brown re-frames the debate of feminist identity politics in terms of psychic states. In so doing, she pushes feminism to pay attention to the investments that are at work in the entrenchment of political positions as well as political aspirations.

### *Identity as performativity*

Butler offers another seemingly trenchant critique of feminism ‘as an identity politics.’<sup>169</sup> Her influential *Gender Trouble* (henceforth *GT*) opens with a series of provocative quotes: from Julia Kristeva, who writes that ‘[s]trictly speaking, ‘women’ cannot be said to exist;’ to Luce Irigaray, according to whom, ‘woman does not have a sex;’ to Michel Foucault, who argues that ‘the deployment of sexuality establishes the notion of sex.’<sup>170</sup> By opening with the ideas of these philosophers, Butler signals that she intends to critique the central feminist concepts of: woman, femaleness, femininity, sex, and gender. She then poses the question as to ‘whether feminist politics could do without a ‘subject’ in the category of women.’<sup>171</sup>

The main focus of Butler’s theoretical project is to submit the notion of a unified subject to ‘a deconstructive critique’ by displacing identity markers (sex, gender, race, sexuality, and the body) ‘from the contexts in which they have been deployed as instruments of oppressive power.’<sup>172</sup> Butler begins this project with a thoroughgoing rejection of the modernist subject of liberalism – there is no ‘there’ there. That is, there is ‘no abiding substance’ that constitutes a prediscursive self,

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<sup>168</sup> Vikki Bell, *Feminist Imagination: Genealogies in Feminist Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 1999), 41.

<sup>169</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 189.

<sup>170</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 1.

<sup>171</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 181.

<sup>172</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Contingent Foundations,’ eds. Seyla Benhabib, et al, *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange* (London and New York: Routledge. 1995), 51.



rather there is only a ‘fictive subject’ that is the effect of a stylised set of acts.<sup>173</sup> This does not indicate that there is no subject, only that the subject is not to be found where it is normally expected to be, i.e. either behind or before its deeds. Butler’s central point is that rather than a substance, the subject is a ‘process.’ That is, the subject becomes a subject through *praxis*.

Commenting on de Beauvoir’s claim that ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,’<sup>174</sup> Butler writes:

If there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an on-going discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification. Even when gender seems to congeal into the most reified forms, the ‘congealing’ is itself an insistent and insidious practice, sustained and regulated by various social means. It is, for Beauvoir, never possible finally to become a woman, as if there were a *telos* that governs the process of acculturation and construction (emphasis in original).<sup>175</sup>

*GT* shows how gender ‘congeals’ into a form that posits it as having always already been there.<sup>176</sup> Butler asserts that contrary to appearances, gender is a process without origins or endings; it is something that the subject ‘does’ rather than something the subject ‘is.’ Departing from the commonly held assumption that sex, gender and sexuality all exist in a mutually constitutive relationship to each other, Butler claims that gender is not natural. If sex, gender and sexuality are not essentially connected, then it becomes possible, for example, to have a body designated ‘female’, but to not display ‘feminine’ traits. The ‘*telos*,’ rather than being one that is substantiated, remains open and never finalisable.

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<sup>173</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 24.

<sup>174</sup> The rest of the quote is: ‘No biological, psychological, or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilisation as a whole that produces this creature, intermediate between male and eunuch, which is described as feminine.’ From de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 281.

<sup>175</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 43.

<sup>176</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 43.

From Butler's deconstructive approach three main points can be made. Firstly, there is not a prediscursive universe onto which either sex or gender identity (woman) can be mapped.<sup>177</sup> Secondly, gender identity is brought into being through 'a compulsory and naturalised heterosexuality.'<sup>178</sup> Lastly, the practices that produce gender difference are 'displaced from view' and are 'sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.'<sup>179</sup> That is, gender is 'performative in the sense that the essence or identity that it otherwise purports to express' are manufactured fabrications.<sup>180</sup>

Gender as performative, according to Butler, has very clear implications for identity politics. Appropriating the identity of 'woman' for feminist identity politics is just as foundational as that which it seeks to disrupt.<sup>181</sup> What is called for instead is 'an open coalition' that does not carry with it the 'presupposition or goal of unity' and 'affirms identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand.'<sup>182</sup> Women therefore, cannot be the foundational locus of feminist politics; rather it is the *doing* of identity politics that will create and transform the identities that are enacted. This does not result in the complete deconstruction of identity or politics, but instead establishes *as* political the terms by which identities are constituted.<sup>183</sup> Being a woman is a matter of becoming in the sense of *praxis*. In undertaking work with others, there is hard work to do that is always transformative.

In the wake of both the diversity and poststructuralist critiques of the subject, there has been a questioning of where feminist theory and activism is headed. Is collective feminist action possible at all without a coherent, worked out notion of what a woman is? How do women work together without recourse to a settled notion of the subject? How are feminists to constitute and maintain political relations without recourse to the subject 'woman'? How can feminists identify with others in order to act politically, without transcending difference, without appropriating different

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<sup>177</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 7.

<sup>178</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 22-3.

<sup>179</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 173.

<sup>180</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 173.

<sup>181</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 15.

<sup>182</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 21-2.

<sup>183</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 140.

others? There have developed a variety of calls for a post-identity politics, in the next section I look at two influential approaches – coalitional and transversal politics.

## **‘Beyond identity politics’**

### *Coalitional politics*

As a way to move beyond the identity crisis in feminism, some theorists are increasingly calling for coalition building as a model for political mobilisation.<sup>184</sup> They do so on the basis of a belief that coalitions resolve the impasse in feminist identity politics between the political claims of diversity and the political need for unity. Coalitions, as fluid alliances between diverse subjects, seem better suited to deal with the complex intersections of race, gender, class and sexuality than do the earlier second-wave strategies of mobilisation based on a focus of gender identity. Unifying diverse groups together on the temporary basis of a specific and shared goal, appears to allow diverse groups to work together without suppressing the differences that might otherwise lead to fracturing.

Proponents of coalitional politics argue that this sort of approach avoids re-entrenching a hierarchical, oppressive identity structure and at the same time unsettles and disrupts the parameters that constitute the group. By bringing subjects together across established lines of difference, coalitional politics are said to create a space for previously stigmatised or oppressed/suppressed identities. Coalitions are formed when diverse groups form in pursuit of a specific and shared goal, ‘according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple

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<sup>184</sup> For instance, see Elaine Stavro, ‘Rethinking Identity and Coalitional Politics, Insights from Simone de Beauvoir,’ *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, Volume 40, Number 2 (June 2007), 439-463; Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*; Cressida Heyes, ‘Feminist Solidarity After Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender,’ *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Volume 28, Number 4 (2003), 1093-1120; Jean Wyatt, ‘Toward Cross-Race Dialogue: Identification, Misrecognition, and Difference in Feminist Multicultural Community,’ *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Volume 29, Number 3 (2004), 879-903; Amy Allen, ‘Solidarity after identity politics: Hannah Arendt and the power of feminist theory,’ *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, Volume 25, Number 1 (January 1999), 97-118; Bernice Johnson Reagon, ‘Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,’ ed. B. Smith, *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, [1983] 2000).

convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative *telos* of definitional closure.’<sup>185</sup>

Bernice Reagon’s account of coalitional politics underscores the necessary place of coalitional politics in feminism. In a widely influential speech on coalitional politics, Reagon emphasises not only the necessity of coalitional work, but also the hard, often painful work that it requires of participants.<sup>186</sup> Joining a coalition is not a choice, she maintains: ‘You don’t go into a coalition because you like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that is the only way you can figure out how to stay alive.’<sup>187</sup> It is the inclusive nature of coalitions that makes them such hard work because they involve reaching out to and working together with others with whom one might disagree with over important matters and whom one may dislike or even fear. The desire to work together is not driven by mere preference, but by a desire to survive.

According to Reagon’s account of coalitional alliances, diverse groups come together for purely tactical reasons, driven by self-interest (i.e. ‘it is the only way you can figure out how to stay alive’). Yet, such a purely self-interested strategy appears to neglect the demand for reciprocal recognition and affirmation. Early critics of a universal ‘sisterhood,’ like Lugones and Spelman, view self-interest as not only an inappropriate, but an insufficient motive for white women in attempting to build connections with women of colour.<sup>188</sup> According to Lugones and Spelman, the only ‘motive’ that makes sense for building alliances is ‘friendship’ because ‘the task at hand is such a difficult one.’<sup>189</sup> Lyshaug raises two concerns with Lugones and Spelman’s positing friendship as the only fitting basis for the building of feminist coalitions. Firstly, relying on friendship as the basis for alliances carries

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<sup>185</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 22.

<sup>186</sup> Reagon, ‘Coalition Politics: Turning the Century.’

<sup>187</sup> Reagon, ‘Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,’ 345-48.

<sup>188</sup> Maria Lugones and Elizabeth Spelman, ‘Have We Got a Theory for You!’ *Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism and the Demand for the Woman’s Voice*, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, Volume 6, Number 6 (1983), 576. Frye also critiques the motivation of self-interest, when she writes: ‘the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one’s own will and interests and fears and imagination.’ See Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, Cal.: Crossing Press, 1983), 75.

<sup>189</sup> Lugones and Spelman, ‘Have We Got a Theory for You!’ 576.

with it the danger of perpetuating women's problematic association with selflessness and the pressure to be 'other-centred.'<sup>190</sup> Furthermore, friendship constricts the possible range of political solidarity too narrowly. If friendship is what is to be relied on as a basis for working together, this would seem to indicate that the possibility of political solidarity extends only to those with whom one is personally acquainted and for whom one holds in affection. Spelman and Lugones are right that it is certainly difficult to see how self-interest could be a sufficient basis for the establishment of durable and meaningful connections, especially when there may be present ambivalent if not outright hostile feelings towards others. But neither does friendship, so narrowly construed, seem to offer a sufficient basis. If neither self-interest nor friendship can form the basis for political solidarity, what can?

### **Jodi Dean's 'reflective solidarity'**

Jodi Dean is another feminist who offers an account of coalitional politics that purports to move 'beyond identity.'<sup>191</sup> In *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*, Dean develops an alternative coalitional model that aims to acknowledge the importance of reciprocity in relations of solidarity. She argues that since differences present themselves only in a 'context of communicative engagement,' the differences that divide us make an alternative 'reflective solidarity' possible.<sup>192</sup> Using a Habermasian communicative action account, Dean reconstructs the communicative foundations that make up 'feminist coalitional practices' in order to theorise the 'perspectives and orientations we need to adopt if we are to work together.'<sup>193</sup> According to Dean, the sort of dialogue that leads to 'reflective solidarity' is dialogue in which all participants take a responsive stance towards each other. That is, each participant responds responsibly to the other with whom she is in dialogue. By this, Dean means that each participant must take up a reflective

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<sup>190</sup> Lyshaug, 'Solidarity without "Sisterhood"?', *Politics & Gender*, Volume 2, Number 1 (March 2006), 81.

<sup>191</sup> For alternative accounts that stress the possibility for alliances that aim to minimise an emphasis on identity, see Iris Marion Young, *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy and Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Cressida J. Heyes, *Line Drawings: Defining Women and Rights through Feminist Practice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); Drucilla Cornell, *Just Cause: Freedom, Identity and Rights* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>192</sup> Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*, 179-81.

<sup>193</sup> Jodi Dean, 'Feminist Solidarity, Reflective Solidarity: Theorizing Connections after Identity Politics,' *Women and Politics* Volume 18, Number 4 (1997), 4.

perspective, which is what she refers to as the ‘hypothetical thirds.’<sup>194</sup> ‘Hypothetical thirds’ signify ‘the space occupied by the excluded other, the perspective that would be included if the voices of the marginalised could be heard.’<sup>195</sup>

According to Dean, by taking up the perspective of the ‘hypothetical third,’ reflective solidarity avoids constructing a group identity that is premised on the exclusion of the ‘other.’ Furthermore, since reflective solidarity is premised on dialogue that is processual, it avoids effacing difference. By emphasising the communicative nature of difference in politics, Dean outlines a more complexly ethical account of coalition politics than that provided by either Reagon or Lugones and Spelman. Yet, what Dean seems to have missed is the amount of on-going work cooperation with those with whom one might not identify requires. Such work requires what Nancy Fraser calls ‘transformative’ adjustments.<sup>196</sup> This transformative identity work requires that, for instance, Brown’s ‘wounded identities’ undertake the personal and intrapersonal work necessary to acknowledge, work through and transform their ‘wounded attachments’ vis-à-vis each other.

I am suggesting that it does not seem to be enough to simply know all there is to know of each other, as I take Dean to mean. There is another sort of work that needs to be undertaken here that differs in *quality* from a mere fact-finding and gathering exercise. Understanding unity amid difference, inequality, oppression and, to use Brown’s language, ‘injury,’ as a relational task, points to the need for feminists to approach identity politics as something more than a cognitive issue. Mutual recognition must reach across diversity and requires more than being sure that we are fully informed in a factual manner of the differences that separate us. There is not only cognitive work that needs to be undertaken, but also personal work. Yet, coalition work, like that of Reagon and Dean, does not give an account of the kind of self that might be capable of this sort of on-going, transformative work.

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<sup>194</sup> Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*, 172.

<sup>195</sup> Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*, 172.

<sup>196</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Justice Interruptus: critical reflections on the ‘post-socialist’ condition* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997), 24-31.

Coalition work requires that the self engage in constantly changing and intensely inclusive, cooperative work with different others, both close and distant. It is risky work, as Reagon so rightly emphasises. The risks of working with differentially placed others range from having to explore long-held myths, as in the case of Northern Ireland, which I discussed above. It also might entail confronting mutual hatred, being ostracised or intimidated; and experiencing new vulnerabilities. I am agreeing here with Porter, that to undertake this sort of political work, one must begin with accepting the ‘responsibility of the risk,’ and this entails on-going self-reflection and self-transformation.<sup>197</sup> Coalition work in the context of feminist identity politics requires selves that can, not only cultivate flexibility with respect to one’s own self-understanding, but also be receptive to that which is different, unappealing and sometimes threatening. It requires tolerance for ambiguity and change. Certainly such dispositions cannot be assumed, for they are dispositions that require cultivation. But proponents of coalitional politics appear to pay very little attention to the genesis of these dispositions.<sup>198</sup>

Theorists like Reagon appear to assume that doing coalitional work will of itself cultivate the required dispositions in the self undertaking the work. Although she refers to how participating in coalitional work will ‘stretch your perimeter,’<sup>199</sup> Reagon gives only instrumental and self-interested reasons for selves to undertake the work required in coalitions. If our motivations are primarily tactical and self-interested, is it not just as likely that we would simply end up re-entrenching existing identity differences – just as likely that we would not undertake the necessary work to understand and overcome our cognitive limitations? If the work is too difficult, would we not simply turn away? Would we not simply remain mired in *ressentiment* thereby unable to undertake the transformative work necessary to work through ours and others’ ‘injuries’? An ethically richer account of the self must be incorporated here, and the conception of this ethics must be conceived in practical terms, that is,

<sup>197</sup> Elisabeth Porter, ‘Risks and Responsibilities: Creating dialogical spaces in Northern Ireland,’ *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, Volume 2, Number 2 (Summer 2000), 167.

<sup>198</sup> Mary Lugones is perhaps one exception. In her article ‘Playfulness, ‘World-Travelling, and Loving Perception’ she develops the ‘loving’ stance as necessary for the cultivation of a ‘pluralistic feminism’ that avoids domination. See Maria Lugones, ‘Playfulness, ‘World-Travelling’ and Living Perception,’ *Hypatia* Volume 2, Number 2 (Summer 1987), 3-19.

<sup>199</sup> Reagon, ‘Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,’ 354.

as an ethics that ‘takes its start from a plight,’<sup>200</sup> the plight of our limited cognitive grasp of the world and each other in it. Coalitional theorists, Like Reagon, when they neglect to outline the content of such an ethics, fail to appreciate and grapple with the implications of their own insights into the relational nature of identity.

Dean’s Habermasian account of reflective solidarity similarly suffers from this shortcoming. She fails to develop an account of what sort of self might be required that could carry out communicative engagement in a situation in which that self does not identify with others in some essential way. As Lyshaug points out, Dean’s account of communicative engagement remains formal and does not address the personal work that needs to happen in difficult contexts.<sup>201</sup> When Dean concedes that ‘citizenship in a pluralist society requires support for the other in her difference’ and because of this ‘we must allow her the freedom to remain a stranger,’ she does seem to acknowledge the limitations of her formal model of communicative engagement.<sup>202</sup> Dean goes so far as to quote Kristeva, who endorses the view that instead of taking the other as stranger, we should recognise the ‘stranger’ within ourselves. Being aware that we are all ‘strangers to ourselves,’ Kristeva points towards this as being the basis for universal connection with actual others.<sup>203</sup> In appealing to Kristeva’s plea for the cultivation of a self-awareness of the other within us as the basis for a universal ethical relation with concrete others, Dean is underscoring the importance of attention to the self-transformation that is necessary *before* ‘reflective solidarity’ can be pursued and cultivated with others. This is work that the *self* must undertake on itself. In order for this to happen though, Dean’s account of the mechanisms of solidarity must be supplemented by an account of a self that would be able to sustain the sort of attentiveness that would allow for this, but she does not. Transversal politics moves in this direction and I now turn to look at how far it does.

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<sup>200</sup> This phrase is taken from Christine Korsgaard, ‘Rawls and Kant: On the Primacy of the Practical,’ *Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant Congress, Memphis, Tenn.*, 1995, vol. I (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 1995), 1165-73, at 1168.

<sup>201</sup> Lyshaug, ‘Solidarity without Sisterhood?’, 84.

<sup>202</sup> Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*, 42.

<sup>203</sup> Dean, *Solidarity of Strangers: feminism after identity politics*, 42.



## *Transversal politics*

Transversal politics is a form of coalitional politics that has its origins in Italian feminist conflict resolution and has been further developed more recently by Yuval-Davis<sup>204</sup> and Cockburn.<sup>205</sup> Transversal politics is both a descriptive term that refers to political activity and organisation in different contexts, as well as a normative model of activity. In contrast to Dean's Habermasian 'reflective solidarity,' transversal politics offers a non-Habermasian dialogic ethics. Unlike a Habermasian approach, in transversal politics alliances are formed that move beyond the quest for consensus at all costs. Alliances are forged precisely on the understanding that there may not be any common agreement that can serve as a rallying foundation. Therefore, the need for common agreement is not the starting point, but is rather the aim: 'what can be agreed upon is the need for a common project, for an aim (not for common premises), for an ethos, not a universal ethics.'<sup>206</sup> Underlying transversal politics is a dialogically situated epistemology, which recognises that there are multiple positions in the social world and that each one of these positions yields its own unique standpoint. Because of the multiplicity of social positions, no position can be taken as providing knowledge that is not unfinished, nor is any knowledge position invalid. 'Truth' is only achieved through dialogue with other people differentially positioned.

Transversal politics follows the principle of 'encompassment' of difference by equality.<sup>207</sup> What this means is that although differences are to be regarded as important, notions of difference should always be encompassed by notions of equality rather than replace them. Furthermore, differences are not hierarchical and it is assumed, a priori, that others will always be regarded with respect *in* their difference. Others' positionings are respected at the same time that they are acknowledged for their differential social, economic or political power structuring. It

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<sup>204</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, 125.

<sup>205</sup> Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998).

<sup>206</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: on nomadic ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006), 139.

<sup>207</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Human/Women's Rights and Feminist Transversal Politics,' eds, Myra Marx Ferree and Ali Mari Tripp, *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organising, and Human Rights* (New York: New York University, 2006), 281.

is in this manner that transversal politics work to maintain the integrity of the individual in a group context.

Yuval-Davis draws several implications from these premises. First, feminists must work to avoid seeing themselves, unless through democratic elections, as occupying positions of representation of their communities. Rather, they should view themselves as advocates whose work it is to lend support to a shared cause. In carrying out advocacy work, the feminist must be ever mindful of the complexity of her own social position vis-à-vis other group members, in general, as well as in specific face-to-face encounters. Furthermore, it is not necessary that the advocate be a member of the particular group she is advocating for since '[i]t is the message, not the messenger that counts.'<sup>208</sup>

Key to this sort of advocacy style of politics is an emphasis on the dialogical process and the concepts of 'rooting' and 'shifting.'<sup>209</sup> 'Rooting' is the notion that any participant in a political dialogue brings with her a reflexive knowledge of her own position and identity. At the same time that the participant is 'rooted' in her own identity position, she must be open to listening to others, who are likewise 'rooted.' In listening to others, the 'messenger' must be open to actually putting herself in the others' ('rooted') position. This openness to the 'other' is 'shifting.' Yuval-Davis elaborates on this scene of 'rooting' and 'shifting' as follows:

The idea [is] that each participant brings with her the rooting in her own membership and identity, but at the same time tries to shift in order to put herself in a situation of exchange with women who have different memberships and identities. They call it transversalism – to differentiate it from 'universalism' which by assuming a homogeneous point of departure ends up being exclusive instead of inclusive.<sup>210</sup>

Central to the concepts of 'rooting' and 'shifting' are that first, the 'shifting' that is required of the agent does not lead to abandonment of her self-centring. That is, she does not give up her own 'rooting' (read identity). Second, the 'shifting' works

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<sup>208</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, 'What is 'transversal politics'?' *Soundings*, Issue 12 (Summer 1999), 96.

<sup>209</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage, 1997), 130.

<sup>210</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*, 130.

counter to a homogenisation of the other. Instead of accepting the other as a 'stranger' (as Dean's account does), agents undertake trying to find out what the other's 'rooted' position is. 'Shifting' and 'rooting' work towards both a recognition *and* acceptance of difference.

The process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' in transversalist politics works to open up the dialogic possibilities in identity politics for dealing with the problem of the limits of cognitive knowledge. Here is what Yuval-Davis has to say about the boundaries of such information gathering dialogue:

Transversal politics do not assume the dialogue lacks boundaries and that each conflict of interest is irreconcilable. However, the boundaries of such a dialogue are determined by the message rather than the messenger.<sup>211</sup>

The process of 'rooting' and 'shifting' works to shift emphasis away from the 'messenger' and onto the 'message,' thereby, functioning to protect plurality in the group. Again, what is most important is the 'message' rather than the 'messenger.' Communication takes precedence over identity. So, while we are allowed to remain 'rooted' in our own identities (we do not need to leave some parts of ourselves 'at the door' as the NIWRM required), we all need to undertake the work of 'shifting' sufficient enough to agree on the 'message.'

Yuval-Davis acknowledges that there are some limitations inherent to transversal politics. First, it relies only on the dialogic encounter to come to agreements, but when this encounter breaks down, there simply is no alternative decision-making process to fall back on. Because transversal politics does not favour an emphasis on shared identity, but rather favours an emphasis on the process (i.e. 'message' over 'messenger'), different standpoints might prioritise different projects. So, for example, in a project loosely defined as gaining control over a woman's body, one standpoint might prioritise legalising abortion, and another standpoint might

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<sup>211</sup> Nira Yuval-Davis, 'Ethnicity, Gender Relations and Multiculturalism,' eds. Prima Werbner and Tariq Modood, *Debating Cultural Hybridity, MultiCultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism* (Zed Books: London/Jersey, 2000), 207.

prioritise the right to be protected from forced sterilisation. If both priorities can be pursued at the same time, then there is no conflict. But very often, there are not unlimited resources and decisions must be made in regards to what should be focused on given limited resources. When such difficult choices must be made, according to Yuval-Davis, the transversal approach is simply unable to cope because it has ‘no built-in transversal way of deciding which one to choose.’<sup>212</sup>

Several further issues arise, which I highlight here. Firstly, transversal politics’ process of ‘shifting’ is premised on the notion of self-centring (i.e. maintaining one’s roots and values) and refraining from homogenising the other while taking up a stance of respect for the other in her difference. Although the complementary practices of ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’ work to open the dialogic possibility of identity politics, these also carry with them the danger of being restricted to an invited elite within a given ‘epistemological community,’<sup>213</sup> which already holds in common attitudes towards power and conflict. Secondly, transversal politics appears to work with differences that are negotiable and does not offer any explanation as to how differences that are not negotiable are to be approached. What happens when ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’ do not lead to ‘shifting’ sufficient to negotiate? Thirdly, and most importantly, by over-emphasising the importance of the ‘message,’ transversalism seems to have left unelaborated those *individuals* involved in the dialogue. What if ‘rooted’ communication cannot be ‘shifted’? And what if the dialogist is convinced to give up her own ‘rooted’ position, abandoning those she is meant to represent? What are the *individual* efforts and attitudes that should be cultivated in these instances?

These sorts of issues are given illustration in the example of The Northern Ireland Women’s Coalition (NIWC), which provides a notable case of women organising across identity differences in a fractured polity on the basis of transversalist principles. The NIWC intentionally adopted a transversalist approach at both its formation as well as its maintenance. It followed the principles of transversalism all the way up - from within its organization structure as well as its decision-making

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<sup>212</sup> Yuval-Davis, ‘What is ‘transversal politics’?’, 98.

<sup>213</sup> Yuval-Davis, ‘What is ‘transversal politics’?’, 96.

procedures – the Coalition operationalized transversalist politics. By way of concluding this discussion on transversal politics I turn to this case.

## **Transversal politics and the NIWC**

The NIWC was formed to ensure that women would not be excluded from the newly created Northern Ireland Forum for Peace and Reconciliation and the All-Party Talks process.<sup>214</sup> Until that time, the NIWC had been a loose group of cross-community activists and academics who had worked together on campaigns to address a variety of women's issues in the country, including the representation of women in politics as well as a host of other related issues to do with childcare, domestic violence, and so forth.<sup>215</sup> The NIWC was created at an open meeting to which women's groups, as well as individual women were invited.

At this meeting there was agreement that the elections were an opportunity to highlight and publicise the under-representation of women in the political discussions about the future of Northern Ireland.<sup>216</sup> Similar to the early Women's Rights Movement in Northern Ireland, the NIWC was made up of 'women from both nationalist and republican traditions, in the main, but not exclusively Catholic, and from unionist and loyalist communities, in the main, but not exclusively Protestant, as well as women who hover between these cultures, rejecting either identity.'<sup>217</sup> The fundamental difference with the formation of the NIWC was that the coalition was prepared to acknowledge and to address the divided loyalties amongst its members. What this meant in practice was that any agreements that were reached on fractious issues had to be worked out. Whereas, the NIWRM took an avoidance approach to the issues of identity differences that interfered with the unity of gender sameness,<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> This was a scheme promoted by then Prime Minister John Major and President Clinton after the end of the IRA cease fire aimed at negotiating a peace settlement to end the 'Troubles.' The rules stipulated that the ten parties elected by the most votes would participate in the Forum so long as they adhered to the Marshall Principles.

<sup>215</sup> Kate Fearon, *Women's Work: The Story of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1999), 9-11.

<sup>216</sup> Carmel Roulston, 'Gender, Nation, Class: The Politics is Difference in Northern Ireland,' *Scottish Affairs*, Number 18 (Winter 1997).

<sup>217</sup> Kate Fearon and Monica Williams 'The Good Friday Agreement: A Triumph of Substance over Style,' *Fordham International Law Journal*, Volume 22, Number 4 (April 1998), 1257.

<sup>218</sup> See page 25 of this chapter.

the NIWC, by adopting a transversal approach, began from a position of acknowledging differences.

Although in early meetings a majority of participants agreed that the remit of the NIWC would be to put forward candidates for the upcoming elections, some women did not agree and did not return. The dilemma articulated by these women is reflected in the following excerpt from a letter they sent to a Belfast-based feminist magazine, *mjn nb*

As feminists we agree with the [NIWC] that the proportion of women nominated by all the other parties is abysmally low, and we sympathise with their efforts.....The Women's Coalition is not agreed on a policy on future constitutional arrangements for this island. If one or more Women's Coalition candidates are successful they will necessarily have to take a position on the key constitutional issues under negotiation. Inevitably, they will not be able to represent the views of all the people who have voted for them.....the Women's Coalition's inability to agree on fundamental issues of policy reflects the inherent weakness of a women's political party.<sup>219</sup>

The main dilemma expressed by these women was how it would be possible for the Coalition to, on the one hand, give expression to the divisive identity positions occupied by its members while at the same time, take a unified position on specific political issues. This led the NIWC to more carefully work out its commitment to ensuring that all of those who were interested would have the opportunity to participate in the process of creating the Coalition. A team was formed to produce a paper outlining the process for the creation of the Coalition as well as setting out the protocols to be followed by the new party. At a subsequent meeting, three core principles were identified to frame NIWC policies: inclusion, equality and human rights. The working out of these core principles was done in open discussion meetings centred around three papers which set out the fundamental principles. The three principles were applied both in the Coalitions relationships to other parties and

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<sup>219</sup> Kate Fearon and Monica McWilliams, 'Swimming against the mainstream: the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition,' Carmel Roulston and Celia Davies (eds), *Gender, Democracy and Inclusion in Northern Ireland* (New York and London: Palgrave, 2000), 121.

groups as well as within the Coalition itself and formed an ethical framework for policies and positions.

A transversal approach was taken in the NIWC's election campaign and expressed in their stance in regards to the constitutional question, upon which the group refused to take a fixed position. Refusing to take a position on the constitutional issue meant that the Coalition was open to negotiation, accommodation and the inclusion of views from all participants to the process. Instead of simply stating their position, the Coalition intentionally listened to others' views and tried to incorporate them. The NIWC prioritized open dialogue above all else and that it was only through open dialogue that any sort of goals could be achieved. After the elections, the Coalition had secured two seats at the Forum Dialogue and the right to send two delegates to the All-Party Talks.<sup>220</sup> Pearl Sagar, who was from a Protestant working class community activist background, was nominated along with Monica Williams, who as from a Catholic background, as the NIWC's representatives at the peace talks.

Researchers like Meyer hold up the case of Róisín McAliskey as a paradigmatic example of the success of a transversal approach to cope with hard cases.<sup>221</sup> The republican political activist, McAliskey, was arrested in 1996 and held on terrorist charges. Upon her arrest she was several months pregnant and, as the daughter of the Republican activist, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey, her case drew international coverage. Early on the NIWC discussed the case and whether or not they should support the campaign calling for McAliskey to be bailed. The case was discussed in open forums. Meyer recounts how the discussions were often very tense. Eventually, the forums culminated in framing support for McAliskey within the framework of the common values of the Coalition. On the basis of human rights, members eventually were able to agree that the McAliskey case represented an injustice and

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<sup>220</sup> Fearon and McWilliams, 'Swimming against the mainstream: the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition,' 124.

<sup>221</sup> Mary K. Meyer, 'Gender Politics in Northern Ireland Peace Process: A Case Study of Transversalist Politics of the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition,' *Feminist Approaches to Social Movements, Community, and Power, Volume 2: Partial Truths and the Politics of Community*, Robin Teske and Mary Ann Tetreault (eds) (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 181-210.

that any incarcerated woman had a right to due process before the law and access to adequate medical attention.

Supporting McAliskey and formally joining the growing international campaign for her release was what seemed to be the obvious position to take given the principles of the ethical framework that the Coalition worked within. Yet, the initial responses by Coalition members were tentative and delayed.<sup>222</sup> Perhaps this can still be understood within a transversal framework. After all, a transversal framework acknowledges our 'rooted' positions. It presupposes that members will walk in the door with their nationalist or republican positions and will look at the McAliskey case vis-à-vis their and her 'rooted' positions. But when members recount the degree to which the case unsettled them, then explaining how they simply 'shifted' from their 'rooted' positions to framing the McAliskey case in terms of the Coalition's core values, as Meyer does, seems to miss something important. Some Protestant Coalition members recount how difficult they found thinking about McAliskey separate from her mother, the renowned Republican activist Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. For them, Devlin represented a painful and bitter past, which triggered feelings of fear and bigotry. Although Meyer tells the story of how these participants were able to let go of their fear and prejudice to take up a position of support for McAliskey through the terms of transversalism, the description seems to offer little more than a very basic account of the work that these agents had to undertake in order to make the shift. Accounts like these seem to me to highlight how hard situations trigger the affective dimension of identity and identity politics.

This affective dimension reactivates a primary wound and forces the self to reflect on self-to-self and self-to-other alterity. What seems to be missing from a transversal approach is how it is that the self is able, from its 'rooted' position, to access shared unifying standards as standards. How exactly does the self examine her relation to herself? How does the self examine her relation to the other, in particular when the relation is an injurious one? Is there not self-reflective work that must happen *before*

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<sup>222</sup> Robin Whitaker, 'Gender and the Politics of Justice in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Considering Roisin McAliskey,' *Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, Volume 15, Number 1 (2008).



the self can access and connect to notions of a substantive good – in this case the rights of prisoners? Does a ‘rooted’ position allow for the personal transformative work that such hard cases seem to require?

In summary, both coalitional approaches like those of Reagon and Dean, as well as, transversal politics in feminist theory attempt to move beyond the identity crisis in feminist theory by acknowledging and accommodating diversity among women without abandoning the idea of unity of feminism as a political movement. Both collective approaches attempt to unite diverse groups of women together in pursuit of temporary and specific goals. Yet, neither approach appears to offer a satisfactory account of the sort of agent that would be capable of the work that needs to be carried out within such projects. These approaches appear to rely on a conception of the agent that remains underdeveloped and it is unclear that they can account for the transformations at the level of the self that might be necessary.

Collective politics place the self in an ethical situation in which ethics must be conceived of in very practical terms. The agent is in a concrete relation with different others working towards concrete goals. I am sharing the view here with Korsgaard that ethics ‘takes its start from a plight.’<sup>223</sup> The ‘plight’ that drives this conception of the problem of ethics is the same as that expressed by Nietzsche, that in addressing the demands of the world, each one of us is limited by our perspective:

Perspectival seeing is the only kind of seeing there is, perspectival ‘knowing’ the only kind of ‘knowing’; and the more feelings about a matter which we allow to come to expression, the more eyes, different eyes through which we are able to view this same matter, the more complete our conception of it, our objectivity will be.<sup>224</sup>

In response to our ‘plight’ Nietzsche argues that it is necessary to integrate perspectives. Integrating perspectives is the only way that we can respond in a less limited way to each other and to our world. But Korsgaard, in making the claim that

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<sup>223</sup> Christine M. Korsgaard, ‘Rawls and Kant: On the Primacy of the Practical,’ Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant Congress, Memphis Tenn. (1995), Volume I, 1168.

<sup>224</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, [1885] 2003), Third Essay, sect. 12, 98.

ethics is ‘deeply practical’ is making the further claim that ethics is not only about the search for ‘truth.’<sup>225</sup> Our ‘plight’ also takes its start from our needing to live together. Therefore, the dialogic encounter of which both coalitional and transversal accounts centre, cannot only be taken to serve an epistemic end, but the more complex social goal of how to solve social problems.

What are the dispositions that will aid the self in allowing for ‘perspectival’ seeing and knowing? What forms of action and practice must be cultivated by the self? How will a position of political solidarity be structured? What work must the self undertake? Missing from coalitional and transversal accounts is a rich account of the self. What sort of *participant* does the self need to be? What sort of self will be able to take up a non-reductive relation to the other? How does the self allow, indeed, aim at transformation of the self within this context? A richer account of the self must be incorporated here in order to answer these questions - a conception that takes its start from the ‘plight’ of our limited cognitive grasp of the world and each other in it. In the next chapters, I begin to argue for a rephrasing of identity politics for feminism along terms closer to the discourse of ethics.

## Conclusion

This chapter argues that identity politics interrupts the abstract, neutrality of liberalism’s subject and provides a counterpoint to the disembodied individual of liberal theory. Identity politics are practical politics in the sense that their aims are emancipatory and transformative. This is a form of politics that requires concrete and situated individuals to form political and social bonds with each other *as* others to establish and maintain shared values and ideals. This is work that is both individual as well as collective. Yet, the key debate in identity politics is generally seen to be the working out of identity categorically. The terms of the feminist identity politics debate have most generally been set up around the issue of identity as polemical. That is, either you are for identity or you are against identity. Identity within this scheme is configured as categorical – the subject is female, raced, sexualised, and so

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<sup>225</sup> Korsgaard, ‘Rawls and Kant: On the Primacy of the Practical,’ 1167.

on. To reduce the complexity of the identity question to questions of category is to miss other important questions to do with identification.

Four approaches to the issue of identity politics in feminism have been explored. These accounts offer differing approaches to the issue of selfhood and how it relates to the practical politics of acting together required by identity politics. All were found to have limitations specifically in the conception of the self that each relies on. Since identity politics are practical politics insofar as they require that a group, or groups, of very diverse agents form bonds with each other in order to undertake political work on specific and often changing projects, the self is called on in an ethical manner. The picture of the agent must be of one that is able to take up a relationship not only with the ‘other,’ but also with herself that is at once reflective, that recognises the constitutive nature of her relationship to the good, where the good is not merely a representation of the self’s interests but is constitutive of those interests.

This chapter argues that while the equality-difference (including diversity) models of feminist identity politics do engage largely with the issue of identity as category, they also grapple with those questions that can be gathered under the context of the term *praxis*: How do women go about working with one another? How do women establish and maintain values and ideals? How do women reflect on themselves? Working within the parameters of identity as a matter of category does not allow for a conception of a self that is able to successfully navigate the work that is required of the self if identity politics entails grappling with questions to do with *praxis*. Deconstructionist approaches attempt to work from the premise of an unsettled identity category and, in so doing, underscore the need to re-think issues of *praxis* along the lines of diversity. Post-identity accounts, like those found in coalitional and transversal politics, attempt to sidestep the issue of identity as category. In doing so, these accounts fail to offer a sufficient account of the sort of self that would be capable of taking up the work required by collective politics in a context of diversity and inequality. A closer look at the issues at play in feminist identity politics debates

underscores the need for a reconsideration of the relationship of identity to the issue of political *praxis* within the context of feminist solidarity.

This chapter has provided some sense of the key issues within the feminist identity politics debate. It has outlined various feminist responses to the issue of women's subordinated position in liberalism and what is at stake when identity is taken only as a matter of category as well as when identity is 'moved beyond.' The next chapter argues for a rephrasing of feminist identity politics in terms closer to the traditional discourse of ethics than to the more traditional understandings of politics in order to emphasise the ongoing and difficult work that is required of agents participating in collective politics in a context of diversity and inequality.

## Identity politics and the subject of ethics

### Introduction

The previous chapter introduced the contemporary debates on feminist identity politics and highlighted some of the philosophical complexities and tactical challenges that articulating and carrying out collective agendas for emancipatory aims entail. Both difference and diversity feminism underline the difficulties of grounding political action on some assumed fundamental identity. Yet, both approaches have tended to confine the self within the parameters of identity as category. They have sought to define women vis-à-vis men or women vis-à-vis *other* women. Such approaches raise the question as to how identity politics can be rearticulated in light of the resultant fragmentations. Deconstructionist approaches argue that such politics cannot be practiced with recourse to a notion of identity as a matter of a settled category – either hidden or liberated. Coalitional approaches<sup>226</sup> suggest that it is possible to practice politics without recourse to a notion of identity, but in doing so they take women's identity as given. To sidestep the issue of identity though cannot entail a complete abandonment of the agent, for identity politics as practical politics entail, indeed depend upon, individual selves identifying with others and carrying out collective actions. What sort of self is required for such work? What must the self be capable of? The aim of this chapter is to begin to show how an answer to such questions might be formulated. This chapter argues that some of the work of the postmodern feminists Brown and Butler can be drawn on and that they offer a productive way to begin answering these questions.

The postmodern/structuralist challenge to the autonomous subject of liberalism has not been embraced unequivocally by feminism and is indeed a point of on-going contention. Seyla Benhabib, for instance, accuses postmodernist theorists of:

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<sup>226</sup> I am including transversal approaches here.

‘Relishing in diversity, basking in fragmentation, enjoying the play of differences and celebrating the opacity, fracturing, and heteronomy of it all.’<sup>227</sup> Whilst Benhabib acknowledges that feminist theory has benefited from postmodernist critiques, she also identifies some problems in their conception of the subject and the vision of agency underlying it. In her view, postmodernist approaches have rendered both notions not only simplistic, but also empty from a normative standpoint.<sup>228</sup> Linda Alcoff similarly views poststructuralist accounts as severely limiting feminism to nothing more than ‘the negative tactics of reaction and deconstruction.’<sup>229</sup> According to Alcoff, postmodernism is complicit in endangering feminism’s own attack ‘against classical liberalism by discrediting the notion of an epistemologically significant, specific subjectivity.’<sup>230</sup> Feminists influenced by poststructuralist thought, Alcoff accuses of lacking the vision of both ‘a positive alternative’ and ‘a better future that can motivate people.’<sup>231</sup>

Benhabib and Alcoff centre their main objections to the deconstruction of the subject on notions of agency, vision and motivation. These notions they view as crucial to any viable feminism or feminist theory. The perceived loss of political efficacy is the most significant reason for feminist antipathy towards poststructuralist understandings of identity: deconstructing the identity of women obviates the possibility for agency and therefore, renders feminist politics impossible.<sup>232</sup> Many feminists cannot conceive of political action and change without the unified subject of liberalism. Indeed, Benhabib attributes the ‘identity crisis’ in feminism to poststructuralist critiques of identity and argues that this crisis ‘may eliminate not only the specificity of feminist theory but place in question the very emancipatory

<sup>227</sup> Seyla Benhabib, ‘From Identity Politics to Social Feminism: A Plea for the Nineties,’ ed. David Trend, *Radical Democracy: identity, citizenship and the state* (London: Routledge, 1996), 29.

<sup>228</sup> Benhabib, ‘From Identity Politics to Social Feminism: A Plea for the Nineties,’ 30.

<sup>229</sup> Alcoff, ‘Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,’ 421.

<sup>230</sup> Alcoff, ‘Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,’ 421.

<sup>231</sup> Alcoff, ‘Cultural Feminism versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory,’ 419.

<sup>232</sup> Hekman, ‘Reconstituting the Subject: Feminism, modernism and post-modernism,’ 48. Similar sentiments are expressed by Nicole Ward Jouve, *White Woman Speaks with Forked Tongue* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Margaret Whitford, *Luce Irigaray: Philosophy in the Feminine* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991); Rosi Braidotti, ‘Envy: Or with your brains and my looks,’ eds. Alice Jardine; and Paul Smith, *Men in Feminism* (New York: Methuen, 1987)

ideals of the women's movement altogether.<sup>233</sup> In other words, the feminist project of emancipation is not possible without recourse to some sort of regulative principle of agency, autonomy and selfhood.<sup>234</sup>

This chapter will argue that, contrary to accusations that post-structuralism empties out the category of the subject and renders it a 'social dupe',<sup>235</sup> it actually incorporates and takes seriously the issue of difference/diversity in identity. Not only does post-structuralism allow for difference/diversity within the context of engaging in political issues, but it also works at not concealing the grave difficulties of acting without the totalising and exclusionary logic of modernity. It therefore, centres the complexity of politics and social life.

The chapter is organised as follows: The first section offers a further re-reading of Wendy Brown. Although, as was discussed in the previous chapter, by developing the notion of 'desire' in the subject through Nietzschean *ressentiment*, Brown has been accused of paralysing the subject, I develop the argument here that she can also be read as dealing with the founding scene of pain (Shklar's 'felt' experience of oppression) of identity politics. This serves to open up the possibility for an understanding of the subject as in an ethical relation with the other that takes seriously its 'premise from the plight' of its 'perspectival knowledge'.<sup>236</sup>

In the next section, I return to Judith Butler's work. Although Butler has usually been enlisted on the side of those feminists seeking to develop (or critique) a non-identity approach to the issue of the subject in feminism, I present Butler as offering a re-thinking of the body (troubled by gender questions) in which the constructing and valuing of bodies becomes an ethical and political issue. It is by unsettling the presumption of an *a priori* material universe into which humans appear as identity that I argue allows for a reading of Butler's project as being about the ethical and the political working together in relation to subjectivity. I end with the suggestion that

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<sup>233</sup> Seyla Benhabib, 'Feminism and postmodernism: An uneasy alliance,' eds., Seyla Benhabib, et. al., *Feminist contentions: A philosophical exchange* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 20.

<sup>234</sup> Benhabib, 'Feminism and postmodernism: An uneasy alliance,' 21.

<sup>235</sup> Hekman, 'Reconstituting the Subject: Feminism, modernism and post-modernism,' 47.

<sup>236</sup> I am recalling Korsgaard here. See *Chapter Two*.

both Brown and Butler's work should be read as suggestive of a re-phrasing of the problematics of identity politics in terms closer to (post-modern) ethics than to politics.

## Wendy Brown: A self with inner depths?

Recall from Chapter Two that in *States of Injury*, Brown argues that the emancipatory goals of feminist identity politics are undermined by an investment in 'injury',<sup>237</sup> and that her aim is to investigate why it is that the constitution of identity leads so often to self-subversive effects upon political articulation.<sup>238</sup> Brown situates her analysis of identity politics within Foucault's notion of 'disciplinarity' power.<sup>239</sup> That is, how disciplining power works on subject formation. Disciplinary productions 'work to conjure and regulate subjects through classificatory schemes, naming and normalising social behaviours as social positions.'<sup>240</sup> Through its attention to an 'anatomy of detail,' 'disciplinarity' power produces social identities as categories.<sup>241</sup> The 'crack mother,' for example, is produced as a totalising identity through the discourse of law, medicine and social services.<sup>242</sup> Identity is produced both *through* and *as* category.

According to Brown, the failure of liberalism to be truly universal, in combination with the ever increasing individuation of liberal subjects through disciplinary production, leads to the emergence of politicised identity. Politicised identity emerges out of and within the terms of liberalism. As such, political identities both exceed and are an integral part of what defines liberalism. Along lines similar to Haraway, who pronounces her 'cyborgs' as the 'illegitimate offspring' unfaithful to their origins, thus rendering their absent fathers 'inessential,' Brown argues that if politicised identity can be thought of similarly - as the 'illegitimate offspring' of

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<sup>237</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, see in particular chapter three.

<sup>238</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 55.

<sup>239</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 57.

<sup>240</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 58.

<sup>241</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 58.

<sup>242</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 58 FN 9



liberalism - their fathers are not absent.<sup>243</sup> Instead, liberalism is ‘installed in the very structure of *desire* fuelling identity-based claims’ (italics in original).<sup>244</sup> This leads Brown to proclaim that: ‘the psyche of the bastard child’ is not ‘independent of its family origin.’<sup>245</sup> Since politicised identity moves within the constraints of liberalism, if the transformative elements of identity politics are to be developed, it is necessary to understand the constitution of ‘desire.’<sup>246</sup> This leads Brown to pose the question: ‘given what produced it, given what shapes and suffuses it, what does politicised identity want?’<sup>247</sup>

In order to answer the question of the ‘desire’ of politicised identity, Brown identifies what she views as an overlooked limitation of the Foucaultian ‘disciplinary subject.’<sup>248</sup> According to Brown, in Foucault, power can always produce resistance – even in the ‘disciplinary subject.’ Although Brown wishes to retain, and develop, Foucault’s construal of ‘freedom as a practice,’ she also wishes to call attention to his neglect of the issue of ‘desire’ in the subject: ‘Foucault seems to tacitly assume the givenness and resilience of the desire for freedom, a givenness that arises consequent to his implicit conflation of the will to power in the practice of resistance with a will to freedom.’<sup>249</sup> Brown maintains that the question is not when or where the practice of freedom may be possible, as it is for Foucault, but what it is that can *motivate* or thwart the ‘desire’ for freedom?

Brown’s next move is to raise the issue of the Foucaultian ‘disciplinary subject’ and the tacit presumption of a ‘will to freedom’ in relation to feminist identity politics. Brown views modernist feminist approaches (including liberal, difference and diversity) as working from the assumption that the knowledge or discovery of the ‘truth’ about women’s subordination (gender) will, as a matter of inevitability, lead to women’s emancipation (freedom). But, she probes the idea that the ‘truth’

<sup>243</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 62.

<sup>244</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 62.

<sup>245</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 62.

<sup>246</sup> I maintain quotation marks around the term ‘desire’ to indicate that I am using the term in the manner that Brown uses it.

<sup>247</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 62.

<sup>248</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 63.

<sup>249</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 64.

inevitably leads to the anticipated freedom. What if it does not? What if the ‘truth’ of the subordinated nature of the gender norms that constitutes women’s identity does not lead to emancipation? This possibility, according to Brown, suggests that feminist theory needs to look, not only at its own relation to power and ‘truth,’ but also at the issue of *motivation*, which includes both the will and ‘desire.’

According to Brown, identity, and its relation to the political, are rooted in the notion of ‘desire’ and not in a will, as Foucault conceived it, inevitably aimed at freedom. To develop this line of argument, Brown draws on Nietzsche’s account of *ressentiment*. In the next section I turn to a more detailed discussion of Nietzsche’s notion of *ressentiment* than was offered in *Chapter two*. I emphasise those elements which are key to understanding Brown’s argument about the central role that ‘desire’ plays in identity politics and its intertwinement with morality, which begins to move in the direction I plan to take to reconceptualise the problematic of identity politics in language closer to ethics.<sup>250</sup>

### **A Nietzschean *ressentiment***

The term *ressentiment* in Nietzsche is used as a description of a psychological state, which is a particular instance of a more general psychological condition.<sup>251</sup> The more general psychological condition is a reactive one and is a feeling in response to, or reactive of, some state of affairs. This is not just any state of affairs, but is one that is unpleasant to the person affected as well as one over which the person affected is powerless to change. Therefore, *ressentiment* should be understood as a response, not to some internal state within the person affected, but rather as an internal response to something external to the affected person:

This reversal of the value-positing glance – this need to direct one’s view outward instead of back to oneself – is a feature of *ressentiment*: in order to come about, slave morality first has to have an opposing, external world, it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in

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<sup>250</sup> For now I do not make a distinction between the terms ‘ethics’ and ‘morality’. At this point, I use the term ‘morality’ as Brown employs it. Later, in Chapter Four of Section Two, I make the distinction between the terms ‘morality’ and ‘ethics.’

<sup>251</sup> Psychological condition here refers to a person’s way of being or orientation to the world.

order to act at all, - its action is basically a reaction.<sup>252</sup>

It is in *On the Genealogy of Morals* that Nietzsche systematically develops the term *ressentiment* to deconstruct contemporary morality.<sup>253</sup> The main question that he raises is what the meaning of morality is. Relatedly, he asks who it is that claims the status of moraliser and why. He asks what uses of power are made in the name of and through morality. That is: '[u]nder what conditions did Man invent for himself those judgments of values, 'Good' and 'Evil?''<sup>254</sup> Taking a genealogical approach to the deconstruction of morality, Nietzsche begins with inverting the history of an aristocratic equation of power and truth, goodness, beauty, happiness and piety.<sup>255</sup> Nietzsche approves of this ancient equation for the homage it pays to man's noble instincts. It is through 'the slave revolt in morality' that the ancient equation becomes inverted - a 2,000 year-old revolt that signifies the birth of Western civilization. Though it is one that:

...we no longer see because it – has been victorious....The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge.<sup>256</sup>

Nietzsche insists that morality originates from within powerlessness and functions as compensation for that powerlessness. Morality is something that develops in the powerless (the slaves) as revenge for their powerlessness to act. Morality enacts the slaves' resentment of the power that they are unable to either equal or overthrow. In this way, moral ideals function as a critique of a certain form of power. Morality is a complaint against strength, the aim of which is to shame and discredit domination by securing the position of the 'true' and the 'good.' It is only through these positions that domination is judged. Morality itself is thereby transformed into power and triumphs. But morality should not be confused with Nietzsche's revered 'will to

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<sup>252</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1: 10.

<sup>253</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

<sup>254</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 3.

<sup>255</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 32-36.

<sup>256</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 1: 10.

power.’<sup>257</sup> It should not be forgotten that the triumphant power of *ressentiment* is born out of weakness and the accompanying values of resentment, which are pettiness and a lack of strength. Out of *ressentiment* ‘a race of such men of *ressentiment* is bound to become eventually cleverer than any noble race; it will also honour cleverness to a far greater degree: namely, as a condition of existence of the first importance.’<sup>258</sup>

Brown suggests that politicised identity and feminist political identity can be read through the lens of Nietzsche’s *ressentiment*. Not only does Brown suggest that identity politics and feminism share *ressentiment*’s ‘epistemological spirit and political structure,’ but that *ressentiment* can also account for the reluctance of feminism to engage with the notion of truth as post foundational.<sup>259</sup> That is, the reluctance, or refusal of feminist identity politics of the liberal, difference and diversity kind, to engage in letting go of the task of delineating the category of the (female, feminine) subject, can be understood through the terms of Nietzsche’s *ressentiment*.

### ***Ressentiment* and the subject of feminist identity politics**

Specifically addressing the issue of feminist theory and the problem of the identity of its subject, Brown starts from the observation that much contemporary feminist theory relies on the terms: ‘the subject, truth, and normativity.’<sup>260</sup> In its reliance on these terms, contemporary feminism firmly, although ambivalently, locates itself squarely within the terms of liberalism. It is, after all the terms of liberalism that made possible the feminist critique of identity and the subject in the first place. Yet, Brown notes that, although most feminists have been critical of the liberal subject - seeing it as complicit in the inferior position of women in society - any serious endeavours to question the subject per se are confronted with ‘palpable feminist panic.’<sup>261</sup> This ‘panic’ most often takes the form of a concern over the retention of an

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<sup>257</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, 11: 12.

<sup>258</sup> Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* 1: 10.

<sup>259</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 44-5.

<sup>260</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 39.

<sup>261</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 39

‘object of political struggle.’<sup>262</sup> According to Brown’s diagnosis, what is actually at stake here is a ‘desire’ to retain women’s ‘experiences, feelings, and voices as sources and certifications of post foundational truth.’<sup>263</sup> This is a concern to hold onto notions of authenticity, which are largely viewed by feminism as providing the very ground for identity politics.

It is in the area of the subject of feminism (in the notion of ‘woman’) that Brown argues feminism holds a ‘complex relationship to Truth.’<sup>264</sup> Feminism’s relationship with truth is complex in the sense that it is a contradictory one. That is, although feminism at once rejects the concept of ‘Truth’ for its masculinity, it holds the contradictory aim of substituting its own grounded knowledge *as* ‘Truth.’ This is Haraway’s problem of how to simultaneously provide an account of ‘radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects;’ a critical practice for recognizing one’s own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings; *and* hold a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world.’<sup>265</sup>

According to Brown, this raises the obvious question of how feminists can hold onto a settled notion of the identity of ‘woman’ to organise around for carrying out projects, yet those projects are, themselves, about the transformation of that identity. It is here, according to Brown, that feminist identity politics clearly intersects Nietzschean *ressentiment*.

Brown argues that understanding identity as ‘truth’ traps identity within the terms of Nietzschean moralisation, thereby casting identity not as something that can be picked and chosen from as meets on-going (and yet to be determined) needs. Rather, it is, as Foucault warns, something over which we have much less control. ‘Truth’ does not simply avoid the political, somehow standing outside of politics. To the contrary, ‘truth’ holds a tight, strangling relation to politics in the sense that it functions to de-politicise what is actually political. It is this sort of feminist identity politics that functions along the same logic as Nietzsche’s deconstruction of morality:

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<sup>262</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 39.

<sup>263</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 40.

<sup>264</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 43.

<sup>265</sup> Donna Haraway quoted in Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 43.

‘What if a symptom of regression were inherent in the ‘good,’ likewise a danger, a seduction, a poison, a narcotic, through which the present was a possibility living at the expense of the future?’<sup>266</sup>

The tendency in feminism towards moralisation, as in Nietzsche, is born out of powerlessness and serves as compensation for that powerlessness. Enacting the same sort of revenge pursued by Nietzsche’s powerless slaves, *ressentiment* aims for (its *telos* is) that which the powerless cannot change due to an incapacity for action. Moral ideas serve to critique a certain kind of power; they are a complaint against power - they are an effort to shame and discredit domination through the securing of the ‘ground of the true and the good’ from which judgement is passed.<sup>267</sup> Revenge is merely imaginary and takes the place of ‘the true reaction, that of deeds.’ *Ressentiment* cannot hold any promise for the future and it has no space for political action outside of the continual reiteration of pain.<sup>268</sup>

Can *ressentiment* do other than re-enact a scene of pain? How might the investment in pain (*ressentiment*) be transformed into an emancipatory politics? Nietzsche points to cultivating the virtue of forgetting, but recall from *Chapter two* that Brown finds this possibility ‘inappropriately cruel.’<sup>269</sup> It is also in his ‘privileging of individual character and capacity over the transformative possibilities of collective political action,’<sup>270</sup> according to Brown, that the limits of Nietzsche’s usefulness are met. Yet, although Brown finds the limits in Nietzsche’s ‘privileging of individual character,’ she herself does not dismiss the centrality of the individual, only that the individual must be located within the context of collective action. Turning away from Nietzsche, Brown suggests that a ‘slight shift’ in the articulation and grounding of political claims is what is necessary:

What if it were possible to incite a slight shift in the character of political expression and political claims common to much politicized identity? What if we sought to supplant the language of “I am” – with

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<sup>266</sup> Nietzsche quoted in Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 43.

<sup>267</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 70-72.

<sup>268</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 70.

<sup>269</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 74.

<sup>270</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 74.

its defensive closure on identity, its insistence on fixity of position, its equation of social with moral positioning – with the language of “I want this for us”? This is an “I want” that distinguishes itself from a liberal expression of self-interest by virtue of its figuring of a political or collective good as its *desire* (my italics).<sup>271</sup>

Rather than a ‘desire’ for futurity foreclosed, as Nietzsche saw it, by the logics of rancour and *ressentiment*, Brown suggests that it is possible to ‘reopen desire.’<sup>272</sup> If this is to be possible, it will be necessary to ‘acknowledge the elements of suffering and healing’ that must be negotiated.<sup>273</sup> The ‘memory’ of ‘desire’ will have to be rehabilitated from *within* identificatory processes prior to its wounding. How is this to be imagined? Is there, as Brown seems to suggest, a ‘desire’ that exists prior to wounding? ‘Desire,’ according to Brown, is constituted through wounding. If I am right to read Brown in this way, there is no ‘desire’ available to be recovered prior to wounding, but rather a ‘desire’ that will need to be rehabilitated from within the wounding. I want to suggest that in order to ‘reopen’ ‘desire’ ‘prior to its wounding,’ the notion of ‘desire’ will have to be approached in a way that is similar to that found in Aristotle.

*Orexis* (desire) in Aristotle, is tied to the emotions and is a constituent cause of motion. However, desire must be guided, as Nietzsche’s story of *ressentiment* so painfully points out. In Aristotle, *orexis* is guided by right reason; these together are what cause us to act, that is, they are what *motivates* us. Moral virtue and desire interact and relate closely with practical wisdom. *Orexis* provides final motivation for virtuous action, but it does not work in isolation. In Aristotle, we desire the good, and practical reason guides us in attaining it. The issue of Foucault’s subject’s tacitly presumed will to freedom, or *telos* of freedom, becomes converted to the good as the subject’s *telos*.

It may not seem that Brown’s account of identity and ‘desire’ (*ressentiment*) could be squared with this latter notion of Aristotle’s. But I want to suggest - and I develop in later chapters - that Brown’s work, upon which I have drawn, can be

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<sup>271</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 75.

<sup>272</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 74-76.

<sup>273</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 75.

taken and developed in just such a direction. Brown's argument for a 'slight shift' away from 'I am' to 'I want this for us' necessarily places the self at the centre of this project in relation to the collectivity, and as such there is work that must be done by the subject in relation to the other. Thus, when Brown writes that the problematic of pain at the heart of identity politics can be relieved if it is given 'the chance to be heard into a certain release, recognised into self-overcoming, incited into possibilities for triumphing over, and hence losing, itself,'<sup>274</sup> she is not formulating an argument about a politics of recognition *pace* Taylor<sup>275</sup> or Fraser.<sup>276</sup> Rather, Brown is making an argument for collective transformative political projects premised on a notion of diversity in which differences are 'grasped from a perspective larger than simply one point in an ensemble.'<sup>277</sup>

As I suggested in Chapter Two, coalitions and collective politics place the self in an ethical situation, but an ethics that must be conceived of in very practical terms. As Brown points out, the agent is in a concrete relation with others working towards concrete goals. This practical ethics, to borrow from Korsgaard again, 'takes its start from a plight.'<sup>278</sup> The 'plight' that drives this conception of the problem of the self in an ethical situation is that in addressing the demands of the world, not only is the agent limited by her perspective, but she is also engaged in trying to figure out how to live together with differentially placed others.<sup>279</sup> How does Brown draw such an agent?

Brown supplies a picture of this self, albeit in sketch form, less affirmative than contrastive. The subject cannot be defined against: the private sphere, the body, reproduction and production and such other similar categories. It is not contained within the conventional boundaries of political theory. Instead it is vulnerable to

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<sup>274</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 74-5.

<sup>275</sup> Charles Taylor, *The Politics of Recognition in Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 225-56.

<sup>276</sup> Nancy Fraser, *Justice interruptus: critical reflections on the 'postsocialist' condition*. See especially Chapter 7.

<sup>277</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 51.

<sup>278</sup> Korsgaard, 'Rawls and Kant: On the Primacy of the Practical,' 1168.

<sup>279</sup> By phrasing this as 'how to live together' I mean to invoke Reagon here: 'it is the only way you can figure out how to stay alive.' See Chapter two, page 42.



disruption, invasion and reconfiguration.<sup>280</sup> The ‘I am’ is not *not* present, but is re-understood as potentially transformative and ‘in motion.’<sup>281</sup> The potential for transformation is carried out in the context of identity politics, which is premised on the shared experience of oppression. Following Nietzsche, the shared experience of oppression is *ressentiment*. In Brown the practical politics of identity politics must grapple with this. The projects of identity politics necessitate a turn to ethics that is not confined to the parameters of the self’s relations with others, but must be expanded to include the work that the self must carry out on herself as well.

Although Brown voices a strong concern for any sort of moralising tendencies, I read her as pointing towards an ethical rephrasing of the identity politics problematic. To move away from *ressentiment* and to acknowledge the role of and presence of the workings of *ressentiment*, Brown asserts is to allow in the possibility of bringing in an investigation of the complexity of power positions, struggles over subject positions, and to use these as a basis for thinking, acting, forging and maintaining new, better ethical positions. It is in her more recent work that Brown extends this Nietzschean interpretation of morality, refining and critiquing it and importantly distinguishing morality from moralism. I turn to this in the following section.

## Morality versus moralism

In *Politics out of History*, Brown distinguishes between morality and moralism and suggests that there is ‘a difference between a galvanising moral vision and a reproachful moralising sensibility.’<sup>282</sup> She notes that the Oxford English Dictionary defines morality as ‘ethical wisdom [or a] doctrine or system concerned with moral conduct or duty.’<sup>283</sup> Moralism, on the other hand, is defined as ‘addiction to moralizing...[it is a] religion....reduced to moral practice.’<sup>284</sup> Moralism is the inversion of morality:

<sup>280</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 50.

<sup>281</sup> Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity*, 75.

<sup>282</sup> Wendy Brown, *Politics Out of History* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 22.

<sup>283</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 23.

<sup>284</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 23.

From this account, moralism would appear to be a kind of temporal trace, a remnant of a discourse whose heritage and legitimacy it claims while in fact inverting the discourses sense and sensibility. At the extreme, moralism may be seen as a kind of posture or pose taken up in the ruins of morality by its faithful adherents; it is thus a ‘fall’ from morality, a ‘reversal’ of morality, and an impoverished substitute for, or reaction from the evisceration of a sustaining moral vision.<sup>285</sup>

Although both moralism and morality try to take up a position that is distant from politics, they are not the same. As an ‘addiction,’ moralism is akin to a ‘posture’ or a ‘pose’ that the self takes up and is compulsive rather than reflective.<sup>286</sup> Morality on the other hand, is associated with deliberate action. In its secular enactment, moralism is ritualised and closely associated with punishment. In moralism the self is enacted outside of its historical context, although actively implicated within a specific moment.

Nihilistic and impoverished, moralism is the opposite of morality and, according to Brown, is where *ressentiment* is located. It is in thinking through the distinction between moralism and morality that Brown refines her usage of *ressentiment* as well as critiques Nietzsche’s account for having failed to distinguish between ‘active moral struggles against insubordination and the reproaches and nay-saying of what he called slave-morality.’<sup>287</sup> Drawing on Ghandi and Martin Luther King’s affirmation of the capacity of the subjugated to act positively for political and social emancipation, Brown makes a distinction between the *ressentiment* of moralism and the more open possibility of morality.

Whereas in politics, morality is largely confined to issues pertaining to rightness in action and defining the moral limits of power, the political movements associated with Ghandi and King were based in morality as opposition to a ‘specific immoral regime.’<sup>288</sup> The struggles of both King and Ghandi were articulated through the language of moral rightness and in opposition to power. These political movements,

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<sup>285</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 23.

<sup>286</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 23.

<sup>287</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 25-6.

<sup>288</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 25.

although premised on and articulated through morality, turned that moral principle into a specifically, self-conscious power, the aim of which was to distinguish itself in ‘style, bearing and tactics’ from the power of the immoral regime.<sup>289</sup>

A Nietzschean analysis falls short, according to Brown, in its lack of an account of the difference between *active* moral struggles carried out against subordination and the nay-saying slave morality. Ghandi and King exemplify affirmative moral struggles that are characterised by an openness that does not reiterate subjugated identity, but rather a contingent and affirmative *collective* project. What Brown is emphasising here is the tentative and social nature of these sorts of affirmative moral struggles – neither element of which Nietzsche allowed for.

Brown goes on to argue that although movements like those of Ghandi and King did not completely eschew the identity constituted under oppression, nor did they premise solidarity upon it. Instead, solidarity was premised on a set of shared beliefs. These movements were driven by opposition to the particular political systems and social arrangements of segregation, colonialism and caste society. They were not driven by reproaching ‘others’ (whites or British) or by indeterminate anti-racism campaigns. In other words, these emancipatory movements took place within and through the terms of liberalism’s universal human rights. Yet, although these movements do not reflect those identity politics movements characterised by Nietzschean *ressentiment*, in that they do not turn on a solidarity premised on and expressed through identity born out of oppression, Brown critiques them precisely because of their lack of attention to difference. By embracing liberalism’s universal concept of personhood, they not only do so at the expense of all that is contingent and context-specific in political life, but they inherit all that comes with the concept of the person that sits at the heart of liberalism. Brown’s central point is that morality holds an uneasy relationship with power and critique. If this is overlooked, morality all too easily slides into moralism.

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<sup>289</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 25.

How does morality not slide into moralism? To slide into something implies passivity. It is the opposite of active. It has the implication that one has ceased being vigilant and ceased being active. Guarding against ‘sliding’ means remaining active. Morality is marked by openness and an affirmation of passion. Morality is positive and politically necessary to any collective political project. In contrast to this, moralism precludes debate in that it is ‘intensely antagonistic toward a richly agonistic political or intellectual life.’<sup>290</sup>

It is through this elaboration of the similarities and differences between moralism and morality and their complex relationship with politics that Brown is able to begin to show how she might move productively beyond the Nietzschean terms of *ressentiment*. She recasts moralism (*ressentiment*) as marking a crisis in the political *telos* of identity based politics: ‘such politics [is] not only a sign of stubborn clinging to a certain equation of truth and powerlessness, or as the acting of an injured will, but [is] a symptom of a broken historical narrative to which we have not yet forged alternatives.’<sup>291</sup> Moralism indicates a crisis and stagnation. Identity politics that partake so often in moralism suffer from a lack of ‘a vision for the future that overcomes the political significance of differences and thus lacks an affirmative collective subject.’<sup>292</sup> Moralism functions as a prohibition on practice as our actions are reduced to moralistic reproaches.

I now turn to look at Judith Butler’s work, which takes a similar path to that of Brown’s. Whereas Brown takes a Nietzschean lead, Butler takes a Foucaultian and Levinsonian path and ultimately a Spinozan one. Viewed as a whole, Butler’s work demonstrates scepticism about ethics and at the same time begins to paint a different concept of ethics. This is most apparent in *Gender Trouble (GT)* and *The Psychic Life of Power (PLP)*. In so doing, Butler’s work disrupts the traditional boundaries of ethical theory. Where most modern moral theory begins its conception of ethics from the starting point of action and presumes a moral actor, Butler takes us one step back and locates ethics in the very conception or construction of a person (or body) as

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<sup>290</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 30.

<sup>291</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 23.

<sup>292</sup> Brown, *Politics Out of History*, 40.

such. Butler's ethical turn does two positive things for feminism. First, it firmly positions the matter of the body in the ethical domain thereby decisively embodying the subject. Second, this she accomplishes through her notion of subjectivation and performativity; the body brings with it its internal life.

## Judith Butler and the '(re)turn' to ethics

In this section, I promote my view that Butler's work is indeed about ethics, a view that is not generally accepted. Salih, for example, claims that 'Butler's whole work' can be defined in terms of 'the ethical impetus to extend the norms by which humans are permitted to conduct liveable lives.'<sup>293</sup> Lloyd counters this sort of reading, arguing that it is not 'judicious to read Butler's discussions of heteronormativity in *GT* say, or her account of the resignificatory potential of hate speech in *Excitable Speech*, in terms of such an ethics.'<sup>294</sup> Lloyd contends that these two works of Butler's deal solely with political rather than ethical concerns. For Lloyd, the issue is how best to understand the relationship between politics and ethics at work in Butler's work, and how this relationship might have changed in the development of her later work.

Contrary to such readings of Butler's work, I argue that even at the outset of *GT*, Butler is developing a notion of ethics that shares a similarity to Foucault's later work in his *History of Sexuality* (Volumes 1, 2 and 3)<sup>295</sup> in which he views ethics as self-constitution and as transformative. The cultivation of the self though is based in the contingent and political nature of identity (which Butler elaborates in *GT* and *Bodies That Matter* (*BTM*)).<sup>296</sup> The scene of self-constitution is not one that Butler appears to be arguing that ethics is to be prioritised over, and separated from, politics. Indeed, Butler herself has been sceptical of making an ethical turn for

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<sup>293</sup> Sara Salih, *The Judith Butler Reader* (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 4.

<sup>294</sup> Moya Lloyd, 'Toward a cultural politics of vulnerability: precarious lives and ungrievable deaths,' eds. Terrell Carver and Samuel Allen Chambers, *Judith Butler's Precarious Politics: Critical Encounters* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 102.

<sup>295</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 1, The Will to Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1976); *The History of Sexuality, volume II, The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1984); *The History of Sexuality, volume III, The Care of the Self*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1986).

<sup>296</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex.'* (London: Routledge, 1993).

political ends. She has expressed the worry ‘that the return to ethics has constituted an escape from politics.’<sup>297</sup> It is precisely *because* these notions - the subject, subjectivity, ethics and politics - are constitutively enmeshed, that who gains recognition as an ethical subject is political. And if the question of subjectivity is a political one, then the question of how subjects can work in concert towards some shared (political) aim is an ethical one. Thus, these two aspects of Butler’s thought actually work in tandem rather than separately. This is seen ever more clearly in Butler’s most recent work in which she engages increasingly explicitly in the development of an ethical project as the means by which to undo restrictively normative conceptions of life. And so there is value in pausing to re-examine her earlier work on identity politics and the self in this light.

In what follows, I draw out those elements in Butler’s work that address self-constitution as an ethical project. Beginning with Butler’s early work on subjectivity in *GT*, I argue against the most familiar critiques of this work to show that what Butler is formulating here is not a normative argument about the subject, but rather a diagnostic one about what it is to be and to experience being a self.<sup>298</sup> I then turn to some of Butler’s most recent work to demonstrate how she is rephrasing the problematic of identity politics in explicitly ethical terms. Viewed in its entirety, this body of work encourages me to begin to articulate a rehabilitation of ethics as a move toward an energised political future for feminism as a collective political project.

### **The subject of ethics or the ethical subject?**

Liberal conceptions of the subject tend to assume a substantive person who is the bearer of various essential and non-essential attributes. The body itself is unambiguous and thus of no ethical significance or consequence.<sup>299</sup> Butler makes

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<sup>297</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Ethical ambivalence’ eds. Marjorie Garber, Beatrice Hanssen, Rebecca L. Walkowitz, *The Turn to Ethics* (London: Routledge, 2000), 15.

<sup>298</sup> For critiques of this kind, see Weir, *Sacrificial Logics*; Hekman, *Private Selves, Public Identities*; Benhabib, ‘Feminism and Postmodernism;’ Stavro, ‘Rethinking identity and coalitional politics, insights from Simone de Beauvoir.’

<sup>299</sup> Kant situates authentic moral motivation within the realm of Reason. Although he writes that all rational humans possess the capacity for Reason, women are not considered moral. Women are

clear in *GT* that the body is not at all straightforward. She argues that there is ‘no abiding substance’ that constitutes a self, rather there is only a ‘fictive subject’ that is the effect of a stylised set of acts.<sup>300</sup> Butler follows Foucault’s lead in positing the body as *not* unformed matter, being-in-itself, or some kind of innate biological substance. Rather, the body receives its matter as a kind of *ethical* substance, which it takes on on behalf of the society in which it is formed. The implication that follows this is that there is no pre-social or pre-cultural moment for the body. It is only in through the repetitive practicing of social values that the body comes to matter as the bearer of properties, sexual and physical. These inculcations are then praised or stigmatised by the social structure and the body’s own position within that structure.

Gender is not given over by the body. Instead, it is a process which is devoid of either origin or end. Contrary to the many understandings of Butler that she is promoting the idea that gender is something that is done to us, she actually, on careful reading, is arguing that gender is something we *do*. Gender is not something that we *are*. This manoeuvre requires a de-linking of sex and gender, but before unlinking gender from sex, from the assumed relationship between the two, Butler declares that all ‘gender is, by definition, unnatural.’<sup>301</sup> This marks a radical departure from the commonly held assumption of earlier feminists like Rubin<sup>302</sup> that sex, gender and sexuality exist in a natural expressive relationship to one another. Instead, Butler claims that gender is not natural, which carries the implication that there is no necessary relationship between one’s body and one’s gender. It therefore becomes possible to have a designated female body yet not display traits considered feminine. ‘Sex by definition,’ she writes, ‘will be shown to have been gender all along.’<sup>303</sup> That is, bodies are (must be) constructed as either male or female. Sex and

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morally immature in Kantian ethics, slaves to their passions, although they may be instructed so that they may live a moral life: ‘The guardians who have so benevolently taken over the supervision of men have carefully seen to it that the greatest part of them (including the entire fair sex) regard taking the step to maturity as very dangerous, not to mention difficult.’ See Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the metaphysics of morals and what is enlightenment* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 35.

<sup>300</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 24.

<sup>301</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 35.

<sup>302</sup> Gayle Rubin, ‘Traffic in women: notes on the ‘political economy of sex’’, ed. Rayna R. Reiter, *Toward an anthropology of women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975).

<sup>303</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 8.

human sexuality are not natural features of human bodies; rather, bodies themselves are constructed as male or female, in and through the reiteration of certain discursive practices – *gender*. By questioning the unalterable character of sex and suggesting that sex itself is ‘as culturally constructed as gender’ it turns out that there is no distinction between sex and gender – they are the same.<sup>304</sup>

It seems very clear that Butler is following Foucault’s lead on the idea that the demand to secure a true or core identity is tangled up in the politics and power of ethics. It was Foucault who pointed out that juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent. ‘The least glimmer of truth,’ he wrote, ‘is conditioned by politics.’<sup>305</sup> This Foucaultian understanding of the body reveals ‘the political stakes in designating as an *origin* and *cause* those identity categories that are in fact *effects* of institutions, practices, discourses.’<sup>306</sup> That is, in allowing a thorough-going denaturalisation of the categories of sex and gender, the ontological domain – what is considered to be natural or real - is opened to questions of value and valuing, which is the domain of ethics.

If ethics is not only a matter of addressing questions to do with how we treat others, but also a question of what sorts of people we should be, Kantianism would have us as rational persons with the capacity to adhere to the categorical imperative, while Butler takes us into a realm thought to be outside of ethical approaches - to the body itself. Whereas in Kantianism, the body itself is of no ethical consequence, for Butler the body becomes/is our ethical capacity. Without the iteration of specified gender norms we are not persons. In other words, like other mainstream approaches to ethics, Butler agrees that we cannot ask about the form of the ‘good life’ in isolation from the kind of self that is to live this life. For Butler, as for Kant, one is not a moral person, thus part of the ethical community, until one has achieved certain qualifications. Kantianism holds that it is a capacity for rationally autonomous moral agency that makes a being a person and makes persons matter morally. That is,

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<sup>304</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 7.

<sup>305</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 1, The Will to Knowledge*, 5.

<sup>306</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 8.



criteria set out in advance must be met in order for morality to come into play. Butler appears to agree with this when she writes:

The domains of political and linguistic representation set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended.<sup>307</sup>

Unlike Kant though, she is not making a normative, but rather a diagnostic argument. Butler argues that recognition is a requirement for entering into the realm of morality/justice. Kantianism and the ‘normal’ theories of ethics present the body as a passive medium – it is a person. It is deemed a moral subject in so far as it is rational.<sup>308</sup> The body, in short, is not ethically interesting; it is outside the boundaries of ethics. Butler asks though, if the body is nothing more than a passive medium on the surface of which cultural meanings are inscribed or if the body itself is a construction that only comes into being once it has been marked as gendered.<sup>309</sup>

Contrary to the Kantian vision of what constitutes a person, Butler argues that the notion of a person is always first gendered. It is the inscription of gender recognition upon a body (gender performance) that is constitutive of personhood. What qualifies one as being a subject, according to Butler, is that one inculcates one’s designated gender – one is either male or female. ‘Persons only become intelligible’, she writes, ‘through becoming gendered.’<sup>310</sup> Therefore, gender is at once an essential identity *and* a social context; gender is relational, contextual and necessary to the self, though not fundamental, a point which I address below.

What I think Butler offers here is a concept of the self and the body, troubled by the question of identity (gender), where the constructing and valuing of bodies is both an ethical and a political issue. She unsettles the presumption of some pre-existing

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<sup>307</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 24.

<sup>308</sup> By ‘normal model’ I am invoking Judith Shklar’s term, which refers to any political society that is governed by rules, the most primary of which set out status and entitlements to its members. See Judith Shklar, *The Faces of Injustice*, 17-18.

<sup>309</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 8.

<sup>310</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 22.

secure material universe into which bodies appear. Where the ‘normal’ theories of ethics appear to begin from a unitary account of a subject, Butler shows how they actually begin from an assumed notion of what an ethical subject is, thereby delimiting the terms of what is deemed the task and boundaries of ethics. By showing how the matter of gendered bodies is hidden from what is deemed the proper work of moral philosophy, she allows for an expansion of this work. She contests the separation of ethics from embodiment and also from conflict. This is made clearer by her work on the performativity of gender to which I now turn.

## **Performativity as participative activity**

Gender is not simply the social construct, or translation, of sex, nor is it merely difference, nor does it amount to identity. If gender is none of these, then what is it? Butler’s answer to this question in *GT* is that gender is ‘performative.’<sup>311</sup> That is, gender is an act that constitutes the ‘identity it is purported to be’ through the ‘stylized repetition’ of ‘bodily gestures, movements and styles of various kinds.’<sup>312</sup> Gender is a composition of the acts of its performance and therefore cannot be equated to ‘a stable identity or locus for agency from which various acts follow; rather gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylised repetition of acts*’ (emphasis in the original).<sup>313</sup> It is the performativity of gender, rather than some natural essence, that constitutes gender.

Although some have taken up Butler’s work, particularly in regards to the notion of performativity, as signifying a liberatory ideal, others have been trenchantly critical. Weir, for instance, complains that:

What’s lost here is any recognition of the participants of these performances, and hence, any meaningful differentiation among unreflective, deliberate, dogmatic, defensive, anxious, ironic, playful, and parodic performances and particular subjects. What’s lost then, is any meaningful concept of agency, and any meaningful concept of subversion.<sup>314</sup>

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<sup>311</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 171-90.

<sup>312</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 25, 140.

<sup>313</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*, 179.

<sup>314</sup> Weir, *Sacrificial Logics*, 127.

Alcoff similarly critiques Butler for offering only the choices of either embracing ‘the essentialist subject’ or embracing ‘the void.’<sup>315</sup> Benhabib has criticised Butler’s notion of performativity as being a ‘complete debunking of any concepts of selfhood, agency, and autonomy.’<sup>316</sup> Stavro makes a similar criticism more recently when she writes of Butler, and other poststructuralists, that ‘their critiques of identity are so thoroughgoing that they endorse difference at every turn and refuse all identity, thereby ignoring the positive aspects of identification required for generating new social and political movements.’<sup>317</sup> Stavro’s conclusion is that conceiving the subject as predicated on a critique of identity as foundational (performativity) precludes the possibility of agency and therefore, the ability to think through forms of collective action.

In my view, these criticisms of Butler’s notion of gender as performativity are both right and wrong. It is true that in *GT* Butler does not seem to offer much explicit exploration, or explanation, of agency, and I will address this in the next section. What I emphasise here is that I think that what these critics miss is Butler’s main aim with performativity, which is not only to describe the foundational role of gender in feminist identity politics. Butler’s aim in *GT* is to emphasize gender as *construction* - not only as something which is imposed on the subject, but as something which the subject also actively participates in. In *BTM*, Butler endeavours to clarify the project of *GT*. She writes that in *GT* her intention was to describe gender not as something that is in any sense put on anew by the subject each morning, but rather as a ‘constitutive constraint’ ‘without which we would not be able to think, to live, to make sense at all.’<sup>318</sup>

By invoking gender as performativity, Butler sought to clarify that gender is not only a constraint – it is not something that is merely done to the subject. By carrying out the performativity of gender, the subject is not passive, but rather is actively

<sup>315</sup> Hekman, *Private Selves, Public Identities*, 14.

<sup>316</sup> Benhabib, ‘Feminism and Postmodernism,’ 17-34, at 21.

<sup>317</sup> Stavro, ‘Rethinking identity and coalitional politics, insights from Simone de Beauvoir,’ 445.

<sup>318</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex’* (London: Routledge, 1993), xi.

complicit. Gender as a constitutive constraint is therefore something that can be resisted since its performativity is a temporal process ‘which operates through the reiteration of norms.’<sup>319</sup> As a temporal act, gender performativity does not amount to merely repeating acts that are always ‘intact and remain self-identical.’<sup>320</sup> Instead, the performativity of gender is repeated anew, again and again in multiple contexts. It is similar to a citation in that it is a deferential gesture that brings into ‘being the very authority to which it then defers.’<sup>321</sup> Understanding the performativity of gender through citationality, Butler contends, results in the opening up of the ‘contingent and fragile possibility’ of inverting power in such a way that it is revealed as entrenched convention.<sup>322</sup>

Therefore, I think that Butler’s theory of performativity does outline her theory of agency, which can already be seen in *GT*. Gender as performative is neither fully determinist nor is it fully voluntaristic. The agent is compelled to reiterate gender norms and is thus constrained by this scene of citability. The constraint of citation is constitutive, yet it can never fully determine gender subjectivity and it is here - in the not fully determined - that a theory of agency is outlined. Sex is constructed through the performativity function of gender. This construction takes place in time and is itself a temporal process which operates through the reiteration of norms; sex is both produced and destabilised in the course of this reiteration.<sup>323</sup>

McNay argues that Butler’s theory of performativity offers only an account of the *possibility* of agency.<sup>324</sup> She also faults Butler for not explaining how a performative politics might be able to transcend the private sphere to have an impact on collective values and identity norms.<sup>325</sup> McNay presses Butler’s performative subject to disclose from where she does her choosing of which gendered acts to pick up (subversively). That is, where does the agency of the subject come from? There is

<sup>319</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex,’* 10.

<sup>320</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex,’* 244.

<sup>321</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex,’* 109.

<sup>322</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex,’* 220.

<sup>323</sup> Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of ‘Sex,’* 10.

<sup>324</sup> Lois McNay, ‘Agency, Anticipation and Indeterminacy in Feminist Theory,’ *Feminist Theory*, Volume 4, Number 2 (2003), 141, 176

<sup>325</sup> Lois McNay, ‘Subject, Psyche and Agency: The Work of Judith Butler,’ *Theory, Culture & Society*, Volume 16, Number 2 (1999), 176.

agency in performativity – it is a matter of resignification and resistance, but it is true, it is an individualised agency. I take McNay’s criticisms and concerns to be those of the problem of the individual participating in collective political projects in contexts of diversity and inequality (which I raised earlier in *Chapter two*). Thus, Stavro is not incorrect to critique the possibility of collective action here.<sup>326</sup> These are valid concerns to raise, but ones that I think that Butler does address. I take Brown’s side here and maintain that Butler does as well. There is work for the individual to do in participating in collective politics and it is for this reason that Butler, similarly to Brown, needs to retain the individual. On the one hand, Butler is being criticised for having done away with the individual and on the other hand she is being criticised for not offering an explanation of how the performativity of gender, which is an individual act, links to collective politics. It is in the *Psychic Life of Power* (henceforth *PLP*) and *Excitable Speech* that Butler attempts to answer what the relationship between the individual, what she calls, psyche, and the social is and it is to this that I turn in the next section.

### **Constrained agency and the inner life**

Although in *PLP* Butler continues to argue that any internal core of subjectivity must be rejected, she concedes that some version of a stable core is necessary to psychic health; in order for the subject to ‘persist in a psychic and social sense there must be dependency and the foundation of attachments.’<sup>327</sup> Building on Althusser, Freud and Foucault, Butler formulates the argument that social naming is a form of alienation emanating from power. From Althusser she takes the claim that interpellation calls into existence that which did not exist. It is in the moment of turning to the name that the subject comes into existence. That is, identity comes into an individual consciousness through another person and not from a first-person experience as in, for instance, Locke. Althusser chooses a policeman as hailer in his example of interpellation of the subject. For Althusser, the ultimate source is always ideology, or the power of the state. In his description of effective interpellative performatives, obedient subjects automatically turn around in response to the call of the law.

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<sup>326</sup> Stavro, ‘Rethinking identity and coalitional politics, insights from Simone de Beauvoir.’

<sup>327</sup> Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: theories in subjection*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 8.

Whereas in *BTM*, Butler insists that the law does not possess a divine performative power to bring what it names into being, she comes closer to doing just that in *PLP* when she compares Althusser's policeman's 'Hey you there!' to a religious baptism or God's naming of Peter and Moses - names that compel a subject into social being. This characterisation of divine naming presupposes a subject who is willing to turn around and embrace the terms by which it is called. This raises the question as to whether the act of naming itself is what brings the subject into being. Butler argues this suggests that the subject is formed in the repeated acts of acquitting itself of the guilt of which it is accused by the law. The dual actions of guilt and acquittal condition the subject. What interests Butler most is the possibility for subversion when the interpellation misses its mark. It is for this reason that she emphasises the potential of unstable identities and misrecognition. There is no subject before the law. The subject only comes into being through the simultaneous acts of submission to and mastery of interpellation. This is the Nietzschean formulation of there being no doer behind the deed – there is only the doing.

Subjectivation produces a subject that, although brought into existence through subordination, can act: 'Such subjection is a kind of power that not only unilaterally acts on a given individual as a form of domination, but also activates or forms the subject.'<sup>328</sup> Adopting this account of subjectivation via Althusser and Foucault, Butler then moves to make a psychoanalytic critique of Foucault.<sup>329</sup> According to Butler, Foucault's analysis of the psyche is not thick enough to yield an understanding of why it is that the subject chooses its subjection.<sup>330</sup> But she does not embrace psychoanalysis uncritically, for she wants to critique it as well for its tendency toward 'romanticised notions of the unconscious defined as necessary resistance.'<sup>331</sup> Rather than portraying resistance as inevitable and natural, Butler suggests that it must be understood as generated in power. Understanding power as formative of resistance, she contends, dismantles theories that would have the

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<sup>328</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 84.

<sup>329</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 86.

<sup>330</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 87.

<sup>331</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 87.

unconscious hold revolutionary potential, that serve to decontextualise, romanticise and de-historicise the unconscious.

It is in her critique of Foucault's account of subject agency that Butler invokes and rethinks the notion of the interpellation of the subject. In interpellation, there is always a psychic remainder after the naming. Identity is never adequate to that which it names – there is always something leftover and it is this remainder that is the source of individual agency. Because agency is the remainder of the interpellation of identity, it cannot be understood as in any sense prior to the subject, as some pre-existing, separate resource. That is, it is only in the naming (interpellation) that agency is even possible. And, it is only on the basis of this excess – the difference between identity and the self – that the former can be resisted. So, contradictorily, interpellation (identity) is always oppressive and yet, identity is what makes resistance at once possible and necessary. Butler puts it as so:

The desire to persist in one's own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one's own (a submission that does not take place at a later date, but which frames and makes possible the desire to be). Only by persisting in alterity does one persist in one's 'own' being. Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists [i.e. continues as a subject] always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary alienation in sociality.<sup>332</sup>

Why is it that we respond when we are interpellated? Interpellation establishes the connection that Butler is making between the development of conscience and the guilt that is signalled and drives the turn. As Magnus points out, what Butler does here is to propose a link between subject formation and self-beratement of conscience, which carries the implication that all subjects suffer from the internal subjection of guilt.<sup>333</sup> Magnus goes on to dismiss Butler's account of agency in *PLP* as 'fundamentally' negative.<sup>334</sup> I do not disagree that it is largely negative, but it is not fundamentally negative. Butler's main point is similar to the one Brown makes

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<sup>332</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, 28.

<sup>333</sup> Kathy Dow Magnus, 'The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency,' *Hypatia*, Volume 21, Number 1 (Winter 2006), 85.

<sup>334</sup> Magnus, 'The Unaccountable Subject: Judith Butler and the Social Conditions of Intersubjective Agency,' 87.

through Nietzsche's *ressentiment* – namely, that it is a serious theoretical mistake to take for granted the 'internality of the psychic.'<sup>335</sup> Butler clearly implies that there is something particularly effective, and therefore, pernicious about techniques of subjectivation: these techniques force individuals back on themselves, and fix them to their own identities 'in a constraining way.'<sup>336</sup> Not only are we attached to forms of subjectivity, which entail effects of domination, but more importantly, we are fixed to them in an extremely thorough-going and seemingly natural way; they have become attached to us as if they were a second nature and therefore, it will require hard work to free ourselves.

A central point that Magnus overlooks is that by invoking the notion of interpellation, in Butler's account of subjectivation the individual does not call itself into being. Rather, interpellation is a collective account of subjectivation. That is, the subject is always called by another. Consequently, the self that is called into being does not define itself. And if the self does not define itself, yet is the holder of an inner life that always defies and longs for the interpellation, then the self that is called must remain ultimately opaque to the caller. Therefore, to be interpellated is always inaccurate because to be named always attaches the subject to that 'truth' of category from which actions are read from the alleged accuracy of some object name. So, for instance, to name the subject a woman locates her on a certain life's trajectory that may or may not be accurate to her own vision of her life's trajectory. But interpellating is never accurate either. The one doing the interpellating, Althusser's policeman calling the self, cannot ever be sure of the accuracy of the call and it is this uncertainty that places the caller into a position of grave responsibility vis-a-vis the called.<sup>337</sup>

<sup>335</sup> Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, xv.

<sup>336</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Subject of Power,' eds. Herbert Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 212.

<sup>337</sup> One need only think of the 2005 shooting death in the London Underground by police of Brazilian Jean Charles de Menezes to understand the responsibility held by the caller – the inaccuracy of the call can lead to the annihilation of the called. Menezes allegedly did not respond to police who called him. Recognising Menezes by his 'mongolian eyes' as a terrorist suspect from the day before, police allegedly employed the 'shoot-to-kill' policy in effect for dealing with terrorist suspects. Menezes was wrong interpellated and because he did not turn to the call, he was shot and killed by the police. For a detailed account of the shooting, see Nick Vaughan-Williams, 'The shooting of Jean Charles de Menezes,' eds. Angahard Closs Stephens and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Terrorism and the Politics of Response* (New York: Routledge, 2009), 96-111.



These are the threads that Butler picks up on and develops in her latest work, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, and her turn to Levinas.<sup>338</sup> The psychic and ethical dimensions that I argue were always present in even Butler's earliest work, are made ever more explicit in her most recent work. In the next section, I turn to this most recent work to show how Butler develops a clearer theory of the self in collective political engagement that does not actually depart from her earlier work.

### **The (re)'turn' to ethics**

In her later work, Butler thinks through Levinas' ethics on intersubjectivity together with Foucault's ethics of self-care. By merging these two thinkers, Butler develops an account of the self in an ethical situation that is simultaneously beholden to the other (Levinas) and to pre-existing social norms (Foucault). To be a subject within these terms is to be 'implicated, beholden, derived, sustained by a social world that is beyond us and before us.'<sup>339</sup> In Levinas, the ethical situation precedes ontology – the 'I' only comes into existence through the ethical relation. Because the 'I' as such only comes into being as an 'I' through the ethical relation, the 'I' is necessarily a subject of responsibility, beholden to the other. It is the capacity that the subject holds to 'be acted upon' that places it in a relation of responsibility.<sup>340</sup> Because it is the ethical relation that calls the subject into existence per se, this relation of responsibility is not one that the subject has the power to do away with.

Drawing on Foucault, Butler incorporates into Levinas' claim - that ontology does not precede ethics - the social as prior to ethics: 'In asking the ethical question – "How ought I to treat another?" - I am immediately caught up in a realm of social normativity, since the other only appears to me, only functions as an other for me, if there is a frame within which I can see and apprehend the other in her separateness and exteriority.'<sup>341</sup> In formulating a conception of the subject, the 'I' is formed in relation to norms that always precede her.

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<sup>338</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*. (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>339</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 64.

<sup>340</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 88.

<sup>341</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 25.

The central problem of how to conceive of the self in the context of ethical engagement for Butler is how to go about accepting the limits to self-knowledge. The capacity for self-reflection in the Butlerian subject is preceded by, and thus constrained by, the very norm which is constitutive of subject formation. The result of this constraint is that any story the subject undertakes to tell of herself is picked up mid-plot. There is always a delay in the story – the teller is always already being reconstituted even as she produces herself. This delay can ever only result in a partial, incomplete re-telling. The teller is never able to give a single truthful rendition; the story told by the teller is always a revision. Furthermore, there is always something that is lost in the telling. There is always something that cannot be accounted for.

If there is always something lacking in the storyteller's account, how does it become possible for the subject to give a moral account of herself? Is the opacity of the tale not simply an indication of ethical failure? In formulating her answer to such questions, Butler reverses the logic to argue to the contrary. It is precisely narrative failure that gives rise to a 'certain ethical disposition.'<sup>342</sup> It is the self's own opacity to herself that occasions her capacity to confer a certain kind of recognition on others. Butler's question of 'who are you?' is an intersubjective one, for in realising an answer to the question of subjectivity, Butler's subject acknowledges that her identity is opaque to herself, that her knowledge is 'perspectival knowledge,' and held in part by the *other*. In this way, in Butler, subjectivity and ethics are again profoundly interlinked.

In *Undoing Gender*, Butler poses the following questions:

How might we encounter the difference that calls our grids of intelligibility into question without trying to foreclose the challenge that the difference delivers? What might it mean to learn to live in anxiety of that challenge, to feel the surety of one's epistemological and ontological anchor go, but to be willing, in the name of the human, to allow the human to become something other than what it

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<sup>342</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 29.

is traditionally assumed to be?<sup>343</sup>

For Butler, the ethical question is one that is posed closer to that of ‘what sort of person should I be?’ than it is to the conventional ethical question of ‘what should I do?’ This latter question is posed within the framework of Butler’s construal of identity as the result of the experience of being acted upon, rather than acting on the world. Whereas, the former question arises from within the constructive manner in which she develops her notion of performativity. Butler certainly appears to be making an ethical turn.

Yet, as I noted at the outset, Butler herself has expressed an ambivalence towards making an ethical turn. In her own turn to ethics, she remarks that she worries that the ‘return to ethics has constituted an escape from politics.’<sup>344</sup> Butler works through this concern in her essay aptly entitled, ‘Ethical ambivalence.’<sup>345</sup> The essay centres specifically on the work of Nietzsche and Levinas. Nietzsche’s subject is self-constituting, wills power and turns away from the violence that brought it into existence. Levinas poses a subject that is brought into being through a primary violence that splits the subject when the Other imposes demands on the ‘I’ – demands that demand not only attention from the ‘I,’ but the ‘I’ itself. Levinas’ ‘I’ also practices a forgetfulness found in Nietzsche in that in taking up its responsibility to the Other, the ‘I’ forgets the violence of the primary split. Thus, according to Butler, both Nietzsche and Levinas share an understanding of the subject that ‘bears no grudges, assumes responsibility without resentment.’<sup>346</sup> Yet, there are paradoxes in both philosophers’ accounts of the subject, maintains Butler, that make their ethics impossible.

Nietzsche paradoxically calls simultaneously for the destruction of values, the annihilation of slave morality *and* articulates a resentment towards the Jews whom he attributes with *ressentiment*. Levinas on the other hand, although he rescues the

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<sup>343</sup> Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York and London: Routledge. 2004), 35.

<sup>344</sup> Butler, ‘Ethical ambivalence,’ 5.

<sup>345</sup> Elena Loizidou’s nuanced critique of Butler’s ‘Ethical Ambivalence’ has helped deepen my understanding of Butler’s sensitive and complex essay. See Elena Loizidou, *Judith Butler: law, ethics and politics*, (Abingdon : Routledge-Cavendish, 2007) .

<sup>346</sup> Butler, ‘Ethical ambivalence,’ 25.

Jews from Nietzsche's resentment, in the process sets the Jew as victim.<sup>347</sup> Although Levinas does not express any of the resentment towards the Jews that is found in Nietzsche, he does portray the Jew as persecutor,<sup>348</sup> thus exposing the presence of resentment in his ethics. Butler concludes with the suggestion that: 'Certain kinds of values, such as generosity and forgiveness, may only be possible through a suspension of this mode of ethicality and, indeed, by calling into question the value of ethics itself.'<sup>349</sup> She does not develop this project here, but does so later in her work on Spinoza.

In her essay, 'The Desire to Live: Spinoza's Ethics Under Pressure,' Butler moves to contrast Nietzsche and Levinas' morality to Spinoza's foundational notion of *conatus* – the 'desire to live.'<sup>350</sup> It is here that Butler can be seen to be placing herself firmly within the ethics tradition. Her views on her engagement with Spinoza capture this when she remarks that she holds him as yielding an ethics in not 'the conventional sense if, by morality, we mean a more or less codified set of norms that govern action. But if, for Spinoza, any morality is to be called virtue and we understand virtue, the virtuous life, as governed by reason, as he claims we must, then it follows that the *conatus* will be enhanced by the virtuous life.'<sup>351</sup> In attributing to Spinoza a certain 'ethical optimism,'<sup>352</sup> Butler is invoking both an unconventional understanding of ethics and a more conventional one, in the language of virtue, a theme I return to with the help of Foucault in Part Two. I would like to conclude with Butler though by drawing out this particular thread in Butler's work. I raise the following questions: What can we expect of Butler's opaque agent? What agency is she able to exercise in her constrained position? What are the inner resources upon which she can draw? In short, what ethical dispositions can we count on in the Butlerian subject?

<sup>347</sup> Butler, 'Ethical ambivalence,' 25.

<sup>348</sup> Butler, 'Ethical ambivalence,' 26.

<sup>349</sup> Butler, 'Ethical ambivalence,' 27.

<sup>350</sup> Judith Butler, 'The Desire to Live: Spinoza's Ethics Under Pressure,' eds. Victoria Kahn, Neil Saccamano, Daniela Coli, *Politics and the Passions: 1500-1850*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 111-130. .

<sup>351</sup> Butler, 'The Desire to Live: Spinoza's Ethics Under Pressure,' 116.

<sup>352</sup> Butler. 'The Desire to Live: Spinoza's Ethics Under Pressure,' 117.

As already established in the preceding sections, Butler's subject is directly opposed to the liberal, pre-social agent that moves rationally and intentionally in the tacitly assumed direction of freedom. Butler's ethics implies that the liberal subject renders an ethical stance towards close and distant others difficult, since the necessity of self-mastery and settled knowledge claims only heightens the likelihood of violence. In contrast, in Butler, what we find is an ethics predicated on the acceptance of the limits of self-knowledge ('perspectival knowing') that is characterised by a bearing of humility.<sup>353</sup> It is only when a disposition of humility works to include others as well, that the failure of autonomous sovereignty becomes a condition of, rather than a barrier to, ethics.

The disposition required by traditional (Kantian) understandings of ethics is a deontological command. This command raises questions to do with what I should do and how I should act, which are premised on the certainty of who I am and who you are. Butler's ethical disposition, on the other hand, is characterised by a receptivity and capacity to not search for and not necessarily to find satisfaction with closure in the question of who you are. Instead, the frustration of being unable to answer for oneself 'who am I?' is suspended. Therefore, a willingness to let go of the search for 'truth' and the related search for categorical answers and judgment premised on such answers – i.e. who are you in particular? – is required of the agent. Tell me who you are, so that I may know how to categorise you and therefore, that I know what treatment I owe you. The search for the cognitive knowledge that would be sufficiently complete to answer such questions accurately can never be finished and so, from the beginning the search is doomed to (ethical) failure.

Through integrating and extending Butler's earliest work in *GT*, *PLP*, *BTM* and, in particular, her latest work on Spinoza, we can understand this ethics as a matter of the self taking up a reflective relationship to itself and not taking this up only as a cognitive, fact-finding task, but as a matter of taking the responsibility for shaping a collective future. The agent does not *not* have responsibility on account of the constraints of self-knowledge. To the contrary, as Butler notes:

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<sup>353</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London ; New York : Verso, 2006), xiii.

Ethics requires us to risk ourselves precisely at that moment of unknowingness, when what forms us diverges from what lies before us, when our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chance of becoming human.<sup>354</sup>

It is only when the self accepts the constitutive relationship it has with the other, that it can take up a stance of patience in relation to the Other. It is here that Butler draws together the connection between the cultivation of an ethical disposition and what she calls ‘an entirely different politics.’<sup>355</sup>

In summary, Butler offers a conception of the subject as opaque and unfinalisable. She suggests that given this subjectivity, the agent comports herself towards others in a patient and humble manner. This has several implications for transformative political projects. Identity politics, projects premised on the sameness of a category, carry a deep desire for certainty. Butler points towards the very premise of ethical action to be that of uncertainty. Rushing suggests that Butler leaves us with a ‘politics of unsatisfaction.’<sup>356</sup> Butler does not offer an action plan in advance of some project. This Butler views as impossible. We cannot answer in advance what political action should be taken since politics is always about specific, contingent moments in time engaging real people. Since we cannot determine in advance what should be decided in specific moments, what dispositions we bring to bear on each other and to each situation matter profoundly. It is because of this uncertainty that Butler’s conception of ethics and the ethical agent at work here play a crucial role in understanding how the cultivation of dispositions towards the other is preparation for politics and therefore inextricably tied up with politics – the two cannot be separated.

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<sup>354</sup> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 136.

<sup>355</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Interview,’ ed. J. Stauffer (ed.) *Philosopher: Judith Butler. The Believer*, Vol. 1, Number 2 (May 2003) [http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview\\_butler](http://www.believermag.com/issues/200305/?read=interview_butler) (accessed 08 January 2011).

<sup>356</sup> Sara Rushing, ‘Preparing for politics: Judith Butler’s ethical dispositions,’ *Contemporary Political Theory*, Volume 9, Issue 3 (2010), 284.

## Conclusion

This chapter has argued that both Brown and Butler point towards the necessity of ethical reflection in the context of difference. That is, the 'I' is always already in the context of a relation to the 'other,' grounded in the context of want/desire for something, some envisioned shared future. In Butler, the grounding context of power and embodiment (gender identity) in this ethics cannot be transcended. Therefore, this ethics is not a matter of embracing and establishing, or rehabilitating normative criteria, but rather it is a matter of articulating responsibility and freedom within the struggle for emancipation. In both Brown and Butler, this is an ethics that rejects the binary opposition between an agonistic conception of politics and the liberal project of normative justice.

Pursuing ethics within the context of postmodern feminist politics may seem contradictory. Postmodern politics is both generally, and in its feminist form, in conflict with, if not mutually exclusive from, moral philosophy. Yet despite this, I have made the case that both Brown and Butler have indeed pursued ethics within democratic struggles and have pointed to a direction in ethics that leads neither to contradiction nor to 'an escape from politics.' This ethics is not one that calls for the subject either to bow in obedience to the moral law (Rawls), nor does it call for the construction of the normative criteria that would enable the subject to pre-judge the outcomes of political struggles. Instead, both Brown and Butler point in the direction of an ethics that is based on a ceaseless accountability (to the other) without recourse to the finality of a norm and thus centres the preparation of the subject for politics.

## **Part Two: Reframing the identity politics debate: attending to the self**

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## The turn to ethics: the subject of ethics

### Introduction

In Part One, I rely on the term ethics to indicate a reframing of the identity politics debate in feminist theory. To pose the question of the problematics of feminist identity politics as a question of ethics is to understand ethics not only as having to do with the intersubjective encounter, but also as one to do with the ‘good life.’ The purpose of this chapter is to articulate further this ethics. What is this move towards ethics? How does the subject of ethics differ from the liberal notion of the subject as free and autonomous? Is it distinguishable from morality? How can ethics as transformative *praxis* be motivated by the relation of the self to the other? In this chapter I focus on three issues which arise from an engagement between feminist identity politics and postmodern accounts like those of Brown and Butler. First, a turn away from subjective autonomy does not inevitably lead to the abandonment of the self, but requires a resignification of the internal resources of the self in the form of self-reflection. Second, the resignification of the role of self-reflection entails distinguishing morality from ethics. Finally, this distinction makes clear that such an ethics is not morality, or moralism, but rather, ethics understood as a *praxis* that holds the self as central.

In the previous chapter, drawing on the work of Brown and Butler, I demonstrated how their work points in the direction of an ethics that is not grounded in definitive identity categories or established normative criteria. Central to this ethics are the notions of both freedom and responsibility (as obligation to the other). Yet, as Brown shows through her notion of *ressentiment*, freedom cannot be assumed. Brown’s suggestion is that freedom finds its direction only in and through, not only the framework of that irreducible dimension of democratic politics which is agonal – the relation of the self to other – but also in relation to collective projects. Butler pushes

this picture further, basing the agency of the subject in and within the other, transforming the self/other relation beyond one of objectification. Butler offers an account of the relation between the self and the other that is not based on power and truth, but rather on a ceaseless responsibility and accountability. Both Brown and Butler point to an ethics grounded in the social antagonisms of collective politics.

The ethics I am describing is not an ethics that is exhausted in the sense of an ethical responsibility to the other, but one that is *motivated* by the desire for transformation, for change. When Brown posits and contextualises her critique of identity politics from within the context of the issue of ‘desire,’ she moves what has been an institutional analysis to the inner life of the subject. Likewise, in her conception of the agent, Butler points to cultivation in the self of those dispositions necessary for a non-appropriative, accountable relation to the other. Both Brown and Butler appear to be centring the role of the inner life of the self. In this chapter, I work to develop and extend this theme.

This chapter is organised in three broad sections. The first section clarifies the distinction I am making between the terms ethics and morality. The ethics/morality distinction has been the subject of an on-going debate within the philosophical branch of moral philosophy as well as in political theory. My intention here is not to either offer an exhaustive account of this debate or to resolve it. Rather, I indicate that there is a substantive difference between the two terms, and one that is necessary to be made for this project.

The second section suggests that the starting point of feminist identity politics broadly parallels a debate in Anglo-American mainstream political theory exemplified by Sandel’s critique of liberalism. In invoking Sandel’s critique of deontological liberalism, I do not enter into the feminist debate over the potentialities or shortcomings of communitarianism, but rather I draw out an element that is shared by both. In particular, I engage with Sandel’s critique of Rawls, which although most generally viewed as being one about the distinction between ethics and morality – the right versus the good – can also be seen as positing the central role of self-

reflection.

After drawing out the role of self-reflection, the final section of the chapter then closes by looking at some of Foucault's later work. By drawing on Foucault, I begin to elaborate a definition of ethics that points in the direction that I plan to move. It is towards an ethics of *praxis*, of becoming, within the context of difference. This signals a shift that Brown made away from the negativity of resistance and the politics of *ressentiment* towards an aesthetics of existence that serves as a framework of an ethics of *praxis*. A framework derived within the notion of *praxis* moves both within and beyond the delimiting factors of difference in identity politics. The self within this ethics of *praxis* is not reducible to the practices of the self in the private sphere. So, although I signal a turn inward, this turn inward is in order to turn outward. The turn inward is one that is transformative and is meant to emphasize a futural dimension missing from both resistance and *ressentiment*.

## **Making the distinction between ethics and morality**

The distinction most generally drawn between the terms ethics and morality, involves a definition of the good life (for humans) and the rules that govern human relations.<sup>357</sup> According to this distinction, the broad category of ethics is the domain of normative thinking about living in general and includes the 'ends we propose to infuse meaning into our lives and also includes morality.'<sup>358</sup> Morality, on the other hand, is that 'part of ethics in which we take others importantly into account.'<sup>359</sup> Morality takes actions as its most natural object and is concerned with how our relations to other people are to be regulated. Character, motivation and feelings are important to morality only insofar as they effect action. According to this distinction, ethics is a broader term than morality and subsumes within it the latter. That is to say, morality is a subclass of ethics, concerned with ethical concepts in particular – namely notions of duty, obligation and right.

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<sup>357</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), 6-7.

<sup>358</sup> Willard D. Keim, *Ethics, Morality, and International Affairs* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2000), 103.

<sup>359</sup> Keim, *Ethics, Morality, and International Affairs*, 106.

In political and moral philosophy, the two terms are often either taken to mean the same thing or, if there are any distinctions, they are left unelaborated. MacIntyre's remarks about Kant's notion of ethical life signal a more serious constraint at work in the seeming interchangeability of the two terms:

Kant stands at one of the great dividing points in the history of ethics. For perhaps the majority of later philosophical writers, including many who are self-consciously anti-Kantian, ethics is defined as a subject in Kantian terms. For many who have never heard of philosophy, let alone of Kant, morality is roughly what Kant said it was.<sup>360</sup>

What interests me is what either term assumes or has to say about the self. How is the self understood or constrained within the terms of morality, or the terms of ethics? Is there a difference? If there is a difference, what sort of difference does this come down to?

The term morality fits with liberal theory and the Kantian idea that we appear as rational, whole beings before the law. This is the liberal idea of the citizen. The citizen appears in the social world already formed, capable of rational and clear thinking, having already worked out his interests. We need only ask and he shall articulate. Moral judgments in 'Kantian terms' are detached from the particularity of feelings and context. Reason serves as the foundation of morality and the 'categorical imperative' is the mode of rationally universalising and rendering context-less moral judgments. What motivates the moral agent is reason and the will. Passion, emotion and feeling cannot serve as grounds, or as explanation, for motivation.

Social and political considerations are not allowed a central role in moral systems. Reason is elevated over passion (emotion) and creates a division between the right (justice, rationality) and the good (values, emotions). Within the terms of (Kantian) morality a radical separation between the two questions of right and the good is to be

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<sup>360</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics* (London and New York: Routledge, [1966]1998), 183.

made. The right is not derived from the good, and the good can have nothing to say to the former. If there is a relationship between the two, it is one that is simply unclear. What is clear though is that morality is placed beyond the realm of the emotions and ‘the inelegant, messy, dense, historically suffused world.’<sup>361</sup> The subject is to be thought of as ‘detached and autonomous, willing to surrender’ the partiality of its relationships and circumstances to impartiality when rationally necessary.<sup>362</sup> Any reliance upon emotion, situated experience, or embodiment is corrupting to the rationalism upon which this account relies. The concerns raised by the issue of identity are of a secondary order.

The Kantian view of morality stresses ‘autonomy and rationality as the defining characteristics of moral subjects.’<sup>363</sup> The individual is viewed as generalised rather than concrete and there is a reliance on abstract moral principles. This is the conception of the self that looms behind liberal theory; it is one in which the capacity for rationally autonomous agency makes a being a person, and makes persons matter morally. Morality attempts to reduce the self to one set of characteristics – the rationalism in our breast. It assumes that the self exists in stasis. It ignores the protean, situated nature of the self. The form of the ‘good life’ and what should constitute it do not come into play as concerns.

Morality then is largely defined by Kant and in political theory Rawls’ theory of justice is most generally taken to be an attempt to make Kant’s approach to morality political.<sup>364</sup> Rawls himself claims that his theory of justice is Kantian. Specifically, Rawls describes his concept of the ‘original position’ as ‘a procedural interpretation of autonomy and the categorical imperative.’<sup>365</sup> Indeed, the priority of the right over

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<sup>361</sup> Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘International Politics and Political Theory,’ eds. Ken Booth and Steve Smith, *International Relations Theory Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995), 272.

<sup>362</sup> Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), 10.

<sup>363</sup> Susan Moller Okin, ‘Reason and Feeling in Thinking About Justice,’ *Ethics*, Volume 99, Number 2 (January 1989), 231; Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: an introduction* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 253-255.

<sup>364</sup> Nicholas Tampio, ‘Rawls and the Kantian Ethos,’ *Polity*, Volume 39, Number 1 (January 2007), 79-102.

<sup>365</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 226.

the good is one of the most central and Kantian elements of *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>366</sup> It is a Kantian picture of the self that lies at the heart of *A Theory of Justice*:

Kant held, I believe, that a person is acting autonomously when the principles of his action are chosen by him as the most adequate possible expression of his nature as a free and equal rational being. The principles he acts upon are not adopted because of his special position or natural endowments, or in the view of the particular kind of society in which he lives or the specific things that he happens to want.<sup>367</sup>

In contrast to morality, ethics approaches the agent as situated in a web of both partial and impartial relations. It offers a less codified set of norms that guide action and allows for the raising of questions to do with the good. In ethics, the moral agent is assumed to be an embodied member of a community. Ethics takes its central task to be that of addressing what is concrete and particular in moral situations. Most importantly, because ethics pays attention to the contributions of character, practical judgement, the role of emotions and moral perception in deliberating about actions and motives, it does not lose sight of the self. Ethics holds that *both* action and intention are important. It takes, therefore, the inner life of the self to be important.

I do not mean this to signal that I take issue with the importance of external actions. Rather, my meaning is that if I do not differentiate between the terms morality and ethics, I thereby find myself confined, as MacIntyre warns, to the boundaries of morality, within which it is not possible to capture the whole of the domain over which ethics should extend. If ethics is to do the work on the question of the ‘good life’ (Brown’s ‘what do I want for us?’), it needs to have an understanding of the self that includes more than its physical attributes, or the most basic measurement of its Being; it needs an understanding of the self that includes its inner life and reflective capacities.

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<sup>366</sup> Rawls’ own claim that his theory of justice is Kantian has not gone uncontested. Some critics have upheld his claim, while others have rejected that there is a tight connection between his work and Kant. See Stephen L. Darwall, ‘A Defense of the Kantian Interpretation,’ *Ethics* Volume 86 (1976), 164-70; Otfried Hoffe, ‘Is Rawls’ Theory of Justice Really Kantian?,’ *Ratio*, Volume 26 (1984), 103-24; Joseph M. Greie, ‘Kant and Rawls: Contrasting Conceptions of Moral Theory,’ *Journal of Value Inquiry*, Volume 17 (1983), 235-40.

<sup>367</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 222.

In the next section, I argue that this starting point broadly parallels the well-known debate in Anglo-American mainstream political theory exemplified by Sandel's critique of Rawls and the limits of liberalism. This debate brings into sharp focus the ethics/morality distinction.<sup>368</sup> Sandel's critique of modern liberal theory shows how a view of ethics *as* morality is overly focused on the external world of relations and actions, and leaves the inner reflections of the self unaccounted for. Once the self is vacated, a sufficiently differentiated and complex account of the 'good life' becomes impossible since the self who is to be living this 'good life' does not appear to be an *active* participant.

## Self-reflection and the limits of liberalism

Sandel's 1982 *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (henceforth *LLJ*), offers a trenchant critique of (deontological) liberalism *qua* John Rawls.<sup>369</sup> I focus on Sandel's critique because it exemplifies the more general critique of modernity that focuses its attention on the issue of the subject in the context of the distinction between ethics and morality. In particular, Sandel's critique works to draw out the dimension of the inner life of the self. In what follows, I do not intend to enter into the debate as to whether or not Sandel's work, in particular in *LLJ*, is most properly to be understood as communitarian.<sup>370</sup> Nor do I address the issue of the potentialities

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<sup>368</sup> There is a debate here about the good not belonging in politics when politics is defined as the legal sphere of action by the state. I want to clarify that I do not intend to get involved in this debate. When I am talking about feminist politics (identity politics), I hope that I have been clear that I am not talking about this sort of politics, but rather the inter-intra-subjective politics that transpire within identity politics as individuals aim to carry out the practical work involved here.

<sup>369</sup> Michael Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1982), 1.

<sup>370</sup> Although Sandel is very commonly categorised and invoked within the liberal-communitarian debate as a communitarian (see for instance Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992)), Sandel himself, expresses unease with *LLJ* being labeled as a work of communitarianism and attempts to distance himself from the communitarian-liberal debate, stating that, insofar as this debate is understood as an 'argument between those who prize individual liberty and those who think the values of the community...should always prevail, or between those who believe in universal human rights and those who insist there is no way to criticize or judge the values that inform different cultures and traditions,' these are not views that he seeks to defend (Sandel *LLJ*, ix-x). Sandel goes on to argue that few, if any, of the theorists who have challenged the priority of the right over the good are communitarian in the sense that they hold that rights should rest on the values and preferences prevalent in any given community. The issue raised by those questioning the prioritisation of the right over the good has to do not with whether or not rights should be respected, but with whether or not rights can be set out and justified in a manner that does not presuppose some particular conception of the good.

or shortcomings of communitarianism for feminism *per se*.<sup>371</sup> Instead, I am most interested in *LLJ* insofar as it critiques liberalism in the area of the nature of the subject that has wider implications for the more general critique of modernity and shares many similarities with the (feminist) identity politics critique as well.

Sandel's main aim is to argue against an approach inherent in much liberal social contract theory that depends upon the notion of what he terms 'possessive individualism'.<sup>372</sup> Sandel locates the limits of liberalism in its conception of the self. He exposes a theme in deontological liberalism, spanning from Kant through to Rawls, that posits the self as constituted prior to its ends. What I aim to draw out of Sandel's critique of (Rawls') deontological liberalism is the crucial role of self-knowledge and self-reflection in relation to both the good and the right.

### **Liberalism and the 'unencumbered self'**

In *LLJ*, Sandel undertakes an extensive critique of Rawls' liberal theory and, in particular, the conception of the subject to which it inheres. Sandel focusses his critique not on how it is that people should be treated, but rather on the unacknowledged claims of an essential human nature that liberalism relies on. Contrary to liberalism's claim that it 'does not rest on any special theory of personality'<sup>373</sup> and that the key assumptions of a liberal society 'involve no particular theory of human motivation',<sup>374</sup> Sandel argues that in fact, liberalism does 'imply a certain picture of the person'.<sup>375</sup>

Sandel begins his examination of the 'vision of the person' at the foundation of

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<sup>371</sup> See for instance Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989), especially Chapter Three, 'Whose Traditions? Which Understandings?'; Susan Hekman, 'The Embodiment of the Subject: Feminism and the Communitarian Critique of Liberalism,' *The Journal of Politics*, Volume 54, Number 4 (Nov., 1992), 1098-1119; Elizabeth Frazer, Nicola Lacey eds, *The politics of communitarianism: a feminist critique of the liberal-communitarian debate* (New York; London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993); Nicola Lacey and Elizabeth Frazer, 'Blind Alleys: Communitarianism,' *Politics*, Volume 14, Issue 2 (1994), 75-81; Penny A. Weiss, Marilyn Friedman eds., *Feminism and the Community* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995).

<sup>372</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 95.

<sup>373</sup> Dworkin, quoted in Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 10.

<sup>374</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 112.

<sup>375</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 10.



liberalism that both inspires and undoes it,<sup>376</sup> with Rawls' subject of *A Theory of Justice*. Sandel begins by noting that although Rawls' project may appear to be very similar to that of Kant's, Rawls departs radically from Kant's transcendental and disembodied subject.<sup>377</sup> In Kant, the right is 'derived entirely from the concept of freedom in the external relationships of human beings, and has nothing to do with the end which all men have by nature [i.e., the aim of achieving happiness] or with the recognised means of attaining this end.'<sup>378</sup> The right must be free from any situation and have its basis prior to any empirical ends. The subject is deemed free only when guided by principles independent of empirically situated ends. If the moral law cannot be based in any 'special circumstances of nature' then, according to Kant, it must be based in the subject. That is, 'namely a rational being himself, must be made the ground for all maxims of action.'<sup>379</sup>

Although the Kantian subject turns out to be 'us,' since the moral law is something that is not found, but rather something that we *will*, Sandel points out that the 'we' who *will* the moral law are not a 'we' understood as particular and situated persons, but a 'we' understood as 'transcendental subjects.'<sup>380</sup> Therefore, rather than serving as a guarantee, the transcendental is only a possibility that must be presupposed if 'we' are to think of ourselves as free moral agents. That is, if I were to think of myself as wholly situated, I would never be capable of being a free moral agent since every use of my *will* would only ever be conditioned by some situated desire. The *will* can never be the first cause, but is always only ever the effect of some cause that is prior to it. Because the *will* must act autonomously and free from influence of any given situation, Sandel concludes that a Kantian ethic requires a notion of the subject that is both antecedent to, and independent of, experience.<sup>381</sup>

Since Rawls' main aim is to avoid Kant's obscure transcendental subject, he must

<sup>376</sup> Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,' 83.

<sup>377</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 23.

<sup>378</sup> Immanuel Kant, 'On the relationship of theory to practice in political right,' ed. H.S. Reiss, *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 73.

<sup>379</sup> Kant quoted in Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 6.

<sup>380</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 84.

<sup>381</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 85.

recast Kant's disembodied subject within the 'canons of a reasonable empiricism.'<sup>382</sup> Rawls wants to preserve Kant's main project, but in place of Kant's background of transcendental idealism, Rawls seeks to offer 'a domesticated metaphysics more congenial to the Anglo-American temper.'<sup>383</sup> Therefore, according to Sandel, Rawls' goal is to provide a foundation for the right that is prior to the good, with the difference being that Rawls' right is situated in the real world rather than transcendent of it, whilst avoiding dissolution into a radically situated subject. This is Rawls' 'original position.'<sup>384</sup>

The 'original position' is a purely hypothetical device used to bring about a certain conception of justice. What Rawls seeks to offer with the 'original position' is a consideration of the fundamental principles that individuals would agree to for the just ordering of society when everyone is stripped of the self-knowledge of the identity markers of class, race, gender, etc., and equipped only with a general knowledge of economic systems and psychology. According to Rawls, from the 'original position' individuals proceed cautiously, knowing that once they lift the veil, they will be embodied and positioned within society and could find themselves to be in the 'worst off' position.<sup>385</sup> Therefore, those principles chosen behind a 'veil of ignorance' would be directed at ensuring the 'worst off' are in the best possible position given alternative outcomes.<sup>386</sup>

The 'veil of ignorance' serves to ensure that political and moral rights are based on what all persons share in common. That is, it serves the function of ensuring that differences are considered contingent and are deemed either irrelevant, or obstructions to be overcome. Neither moral judgements nor political institutions should appeal to 'those contingencies (i.e. social identities) which set men at odds and allow them to be guided by their prejudices.'<sup>387</sup> What becomes clear is that the subject as a distinct individual comes *first* and *then* relationships are formed with

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<sup>382</sup> Rawls quoted in Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,' 85.

<sup>383</sup> Sandel, 'The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,' 85.

<sup>384</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 10-19.

<sup>385</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 72.

<sup>386</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 118.

<sup>387</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 19.

others. Sandel describes this individual as ‘the unencumbered self, a self understood as prior to purposes or ends.’<sup>388</sup>

Rawls’ ‘unencumbered self,’ argues Sandel, fails to escape the pitfalls of Kant’s transcendental self. Furthermore, the self Rawls has presented is simply incoherent – it simply cannot and does not exist. Rawls’ subject, like Kant’s, is still located beyond experience and is therefore, incapable of forming, or being formed by, commitments that are so fundamental to the subject that it is just not possible that the subject could be conceived of without them.<sup>389</sup> In Rawls’ subject there are no characteristics that are essential; all characteristics are contingent. Intrasubjectivity is not a constituent element of the subject, but is rather merely one attribute among others.

How are we to understand identity in the picture of deontological liberalism?<sup>390</sup> What constitutes identity in the Rawlsian self? In the Rawlsian subject, identity is something that is given in advance. Because subject constitution is located in advance of situation and relation, the question of identity (i.e. ‘who am I?’) is one that just does not exist. The only relevant moral question for the Rawlsian subject has to do with deciding which ends to choose. And that is a question best addressed to and by the *will*. Yet, if the Rawlsian liberal subject is constituted independent of and prior to ‘purposes and ends’ surely this begs the question as to how it is that the antecedent self is related to its ends.<sup>391</sup>

Sandel suggests that Rawls attempts to resolve the question of the relation of the self to its ends is by conceptualising the self as a ‘subject of possession.’<sup>392</sup> The ‘subject of possession’ is simultaneously distanced from, though not completely detached from, its ends. The ‘subject of possession’ is locatable in an assumption of what

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<sup>388</sup> Sandel, ‘The Procedural Republic and the Unencumbered Self,’ 86.

<sup>389</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 62.

<sup>390</sup> Rawls only explicitly discusses the issue of identity in his later work. For instance, see his introduction to *Political Liberalism*. Although he does devote some time to the interaction between what he refers to as public and non-public identities, his basic position remains unchanged from that he took in *A Theory of Justice*. For a summary comparison of the two works, see Hekman, *Private Selves, Public Identities: Reconsidering Identity Politics*, 47-52.

<sup>391</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 62.

<sup>392</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 53-59.

Rawls terms ‘mutual disinterest.’<sup>393</sup> That is, any group of individuals does not take an interest in the interests of others. Sandel points out that although the assumption of ‘mutual disinterest’ may appear to be some sort of psychological assumption, when placed within the context of the ‘original position’ that it occupies in Rawls, in actuality it functions as an epistemological claim.<sup>394</sup> That is, the assumption of self-interest amounts to a claim about what kind of self-knowledge the subject must be capable of in order to be, and to function as, a ‘subject of possession.’ ‘Mutual disinterest’ is *both* ‘the main motivational condition of the original position’ *and* ‘involves no particular theory of human motivation.’<sup>395</sup>

Sandel’s main point is that in order to be a deontological self, it is not enough to be any sort of ‘possessive self,’ but rather the sort of ‘possessive self’ whose identity is given in advance of its interests, aims and relations with others. Thus, possession can be understood here in two ways. The self is at once related to and distanced from the thing that it possesses. That is, the thing that I possess belongs to me and not to you; I may possess something that I gradually lose interest in and thus, distance myself from it - there is something that was mine, but is no longer because I have let go of it. But likewise, if I become more and more attached to, or obsessive of, for instance, some desire or ambition, it can become attached to me in a constitutive manner. It moves from being mine to being me. I move from possessing the thing to it possessing me; it becomes indistinguishable from my identity. Sandel suggests that it is in this way that possession is related to agency. Both types of possession suggest a different notion of agency and in turn a differing relation of the self to its ends.

The question now is how exactly these ends relate to agency. How does the self come by its ends? How does it let go of its ends? In short, how does the self go about transforming itself? I turn to these questions in the next section.

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<sup>393</sup> Rawls has this to say about what he means by ‘mutual disinterest’: ‘[it] is made to insure that the principles of justice do not depend upon strong assumptions. Recall that the original position is meant to incorporate widely shared and yet weak conditions. A conception of justice should not presuppose, then extensive ties of natural sentiment. At the basis of the theory, one tries to assume as little as possible.’ See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 129.

<sup>394</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 54.

<sup>395</sup> Rawls quoted in Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 54.

## Agency and self-reflection

Agency, Sandel suggests, is a way of repairing dispossession and is related to restoring self-command: 'Agency is the faculty by which the self comes by its ends.'<sup>396</sup> Sandel suggests that there are two senses in which a self might come by its ends – either by choice, or by discovery. This is respectively, voluntarist or cognitive agency. The former agency is characterised by the voluntary exercise of the *will* - only the *will* can transcend the space between the self and its ends without closing that space. The *will* is free to jump in and out again - unattached, detached from anything.

Ends can become indistinguishable from the self, resulting in dispossession in the sense that the ends are given in advance of the self. According to Sandel, the only way to repair dispossession is to be found in the capacity of reflection, which has the function of a 'distancing faculty.'<sup>397</sup> Where the faculty of the *will* serves to diminish the space between the self and its ends, reflexivity turns inwards and examines the self as an object of reflection, thereby establishing a space between the self and its ends. The turn inwards allows the necessary space between the self and its ends that is required to view ends less as being constitutive of the self's identity and more as being an attribute.

In contrast to Rawls' account, Sandel's self is constituted by its ends, but can accomplish a distance from those ends (transformation) through self-reflection. The self 'turns its lights' upon itself in order to reflect upon itself as an agent.<sup>398</sup> The self is confronted by all manner of competing claims, goods and ends, which may compete for constitution of the self. Thus, the boundaries between the self and a cacophony of ends appear not so much as fixed, but as endless. Sandel invokes reflexivity as a distancing faculty that yields the detachment necessary for the self to transform its identity through the knowledge of the self. Self-reflection, according to Sandel:

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<sup>396</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 58.

<sup>397</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 58.

<sup>398</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 58.

...succeeds by restoring the shrunken space between the self and its ends. In reflexivity, the self turns its lights inwards upon itself, making the self its own subject of inquiry and reflection. When I am able to reflect on my obsession, able to pick out and make it an object of my reflection, I thereby establish a certain space between it and me, and so diminish its hold. It becomes a mere attribute and less constituent of my identity and so dissolves from an obsession to a mere desire.<sup>399</sup>

Self-knowledge is the relationship that the self has with its pre-given ends and self-reflection is necessary in order for those ends not to completely constitute the self. Therefore, transformation is not possible without both self-knowledge and self-reflection. Without the ability to ‘turn its lights inwards,’ the self is unable to take up the distance required in relation to its ends, etc., which is the distance necessary to transform the self.

Rawls’ picture of the self as antecedent to and independent of ends, according to Sandel, renders self-knowledge and thus, reflexivity impossible. By placing the self in a position that is antecedent to experience and situation, the limits of the self become fixed in the antecedent space. Because the self is always already transparent to itself, the self can never be an object to itself. There is no reason to formulate and ponder the question of ‘who am I?’ and its related issues to do with identity formation, constitution and transformation. The only relevant question for the antecedent self is: ‘what ends shall I choose?’ and, as has already been established, this question finds its proper address in the *will*. In this way, a voluntarist conception of agency exemplifies Rawls’ theory of the person. The subject of possession, distanced from its ends, is able to employ its *will* to repair that distance, always already governed by the principles of justice. Rawls’ person is distinguishable from its ends, though related to those ends through its *will* – ‘as willing subject to the objects of choice.’<sup>400</sup>

The antecedent, individuated subject who stands at a distance from its ends, can only be achieved by placing the self outside of time and place. The result is that identity

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<sup>399</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 58.

<sup>400</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 59.

becomes fixed and is not transformable:

No commitment could grip me so deeply that I would not understand myself without it. No transformation of life purposes and plans could be so unsettling as to disrupt the contours of my identity. No project could be so essential that turning away from it would call into question the person I am. Given my independence from the values that I have, I can always stand apart from them; my public identity as a moral person 'is not affected by changes over time' in my conception of the good.<sup>401</sup>

The self that stands outside of time and at a distance from its ends, precludes the constitutive sense of possession and thereby rules out both 'intersubjective' and 'intrasubjective' forms of self-understanding.<sup>402</sup>

'Intersubjective' or 'intrasubjective' forms of self-understanding do not assume that the self can unproblematically and transparently tell its own story. Sounding not dissimilar to Butler, Sandel goes on to elaborate how such forms of self-understanding do not hold that the self can, from a moral point of view, speak for itself by itself.<sup>403</sup> The opacity of the self is only reduced in dialogue, in relation to others, though it is never fully dissolved.<sup>404</sup> Reflective self-understanding is constrained by the understanding that 'others made me, and in various ways continue to make me the person I am.'<sup>405</sup> This means that the self is not antecedent to its social location. The self cannot reflect on itself atomistically. To do so would be to neglect the intersubjective component of its historical, social and political milieu.

If, in Rawls, the self comes by its ends by choosing (for it is voluntaristic), it needs to be asked what exactly happens in that moment of choice? Here is what Rawls has to say:

I shall suppose that while rational principles can focus our judgments and set up guidelines for reflection, we must finally choose for ourselves in the sense that the choice often rests on our direct self-knowledge not

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<sup>401</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 62.

<sup>402</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 63.

<sup>403</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 62-63.

<sup>404</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 173.

<sup>405</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 143.

only of what things we want but also of how much we want them. Sometimes there is no way to avoid having to assess the relative intensity of our desires.<sup>406</sup>

Reflection, self-reflection, is given a truncated role in the Rawlsian conception of the good. Reflection on the good is a matter of deciding what we want and how much of it we want. Sandel points out that although Rawls has made the point that the good for any particular person is ‘decided upon as the outcome of careful reflection,’<sup>407</sup> the objects of reflection are limited to: firstly, possible alternative plans and what their consequences might be if carried through, and secondly, the desires and interests themselves.<sup>408</sup> The self is not ever *itself* an object of reflection. What this neglects, of course, is the constitutive nature of our social ties, or what Sandel later calls ‘constitutive ties.’<sup>409</sup> Since, in Rawls, the self is given in advance, reflection cannot lead to the sort of self-understanding that could play a role in either the constitution of the identity of the self or in the transformation of that identity.

Sandel points out that Rawls does in fact, address the constitutive nature of social ties, but in doing so he relies on liberalism’s trenchant separation between the public and private spheres. Indeed, in this regard we find Rawls contrasting ‘the conception of the person connected with the public conception of justice’ with ‘citizens in their personal affairs, or within the internal life of associations’ who here ‘may have attachments and loves that they believe they would not, or could not, stand apart from.’<sup>410</sup> The person that is connected with the public on the other hand, grapples with no attachments that might be seen in some manner to be essential to who he is, or in some way constitutive of whom he is. So, although we may be ‘thickly constituted selves’ in the private sphere, in the public sphere we easily shed this ‘thick’ self and enter ‘unencumbered.’<sup>411</sup> How can this split personality be explained? How can the self be encumbered and constituted in its private life, yet

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<sup>406</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 158.

<sup>407</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 366.

<sup>408</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 158.

<sup>409</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy’s Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*, (Cambridge, Mass.; London : Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 117.

<sup>410</sup> John Rawls, ‘Kantian constructivism in moral theory,’ *The Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 77, Number 9 (September 9, 1980), 545.

<sup>411</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 182.



upon stepping into the public sphere, is not only able to shed its private identity, but is also able to remain unaffected, and undefined by any public ties?

Sandel surmises that Rawls cannot be making a psychological claim, but must rather be making an epistemological one.<sup>412</sup> That is, in order for the self to be able to perform the detachment required of it in the public sphere, the self must regard itself as distinct and independent from its ends, whatever these are, in *both* the public and private spheres. And it is here that the deontological self is exposed as incoherent. For to allow private ends to be constitutive of the self, opens the door to the possibility that public ends are also likely to be constitutive:

Once the bounds of the self are no longer fixed, individuated in advance and given prior to experience, there is no saying in principle what sorts of experiences could shape or reshape them, no guarantee that only ‘private’ and never ‘public’ events could conceivably be decisive.<sup>413</sup>

The self is, therefore, not only tied to and constituted by its identity in the private sphere; it is also tied to and constituted in the public sphere. Just as politics are not beyond the self, so is the self not beyond the reach of politics – in both, what liberalism has traditionally defined as the public and the private spheres.

For the Rawlsian subject, the good is completely open and accessible so long as it is taken as the interests of an autonomous agent (individuated prior to ends). In deontological liberalism, just as the right is a voluntaristic collective choice (in the ‘original position’), the good is also an individual, voluntaristic choice. The good is understood as something akin to a satisfaction of preferences, or interests that are ‘out there,’ separate and distinct from the self. The parties in the ‘original position’ ‘think of themselves as beings who can and do choose their final ends (always plural in number).’<sup>414</sup> That is, the self forms a preference for some good voluntarily, which precludes the possibility of the good being in any way constitutive of the self.

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<sup>412</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 182-3.

<sup>413</sup> Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice*, 183.

<sup>414</sup> Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 493.

But the good cannot merely be conceived of as preferences or interests that are just ‘out there’ at a distance from the self. According to Sandel, the good is more than this; the good is *constitutive* of the self. The good as constitutive of the self, therefore, functions to bring the self out of its transcendent or antecedent position. Whereas in Rawls’ schemata, the self is defined by the right (to the extent that in the ‘original position’ we are guided by a rationality that inevitably leads us to delineate the right principles of justice) and not by the good, what Sandel is getting at is that it is, in fact, the good that defines the self.

Once the liberal abstract self is dislodged from its *a priori* position certain radical results follow. Sandel’s critique of Rawls’ self helpfully sketches how self-knowledge, self-reflection and agency are inextricably bound up with the identity of the self. Self-knowledge is both something more complicated than (in Rawls) simply knowing what and how much one’s wants and desires are, and it is also something much less private. In fact, self-knowledge is radically situated in intersubjective contact, and this intersubjective encounter is not merely instrumental to self-knowledge but is actually constitutive of it. It is self-reflection (along with self-knowledge) that allows for transformation.

At this point, I would like to draw a number of conclusions from Sandel’s critique of Rawls’ deontological liberal subject to move in a further direction. First, one of the pervasive themes is that identity does not pre-exist situation. The self only makes sense and makes sense of itself intrasubjectively through an intersubjective situation. On my reading of Sandel’s final conclusion of *LLJ*, this necessarily undoes the partitioning off of the antecedently formed public self from the situated private self. The self cannot have *both* a private self that is encumbered and a public self that is ‘unencumbered;’ both are situated and constituted inter/intrasubjectively. This begs the question though of how constitutive attachments, and the self’s relation to the good as constitutive, relate to agency. What ensures agency? Agency afterall suggests change, but what direction will the change take? If agency is ensured only in interasubjectivity, what ensures that the social relation is non-reductive?

In Sandel's understanding of the self, it would seem that it is reflective self-knowledge that ensures agency. Self-reflection is critical to maintain and is what creates a distance between the subject and the good as well as the right. That is, we may be constituted by the good as well as by the right, but self-reflection ensures that we are not thereby undone by them. Yet, the agency we hold is not boundless, it is an agency limited by intersubjectivity. The subject is always already in a concrete relation with others. If the capacity for critical self-reflection and self-knowledge allow for agency, what does this look like in the intersubjective context? How does the self 'turn its lights inwards'? What is this 'turn'? From where does it originate? What motivates the turn? What does it aim for? What happens in the moment of turning?

Sandel does not consider these questions. Therefore, I find in Sandel a limit that signals the necessity to move beyond him. Having foregrounded the central role that the inner life (intrasubjectivity) of the self must play – the self turning its 'lights inwards' – Sandel seems to presume too much about the self, or at least does not offer enough of an explanation. Therefore, retaining the point that Sandel has made – that there is a connection between self-knowledge and self-reflection and these are connected to agency – in the next section I ask how we might better understand the connection between the two. I turn to Foucault's account of the self in his later work, in particular in his trilogy *History of Sexuality*,<sup>415</sup> to argue that Foucault takes us in a useful direction for considering the connection between self-knowledge and self-reflection. Foucault helpfully, makes a similar, but more elaborate, distinction between ethics and morality<sup>416</sup> and in so doing, offers the resources to develop further an understanding of the relationship between self-knowledge and self-reflection.

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<sup>415</sup> The following three works: Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 1, The Will to Knowledge; The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure; The History of Sexuality: 3 The Care of the Self*.

<sup>416</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*.

## Foucault's distinction

### Foucault's morality/ethics distinction

Foucault makes a similar distinction between ethics and morality to the one I have been trying to make. According to Foucault, the term morality refers to those 'values and rules of action that are recommended to individuals through the intermediary of various prescriptive agencies.'<sup>417</sup> Foucault distinguishes moral values and codes from the actual behaviour of individuals in relation to them. Ethics, on the other hand, he defines as 'the manner in which one ought to 'con-duct oneself.'<sup>418</sup> That is to say, ethics is the manner in which one ought to 'form oneself as an ethical subject acting in relation to the prescriptive elements that make up the code.'<sup>419</sup>

According to Foucault, any morality has three aspects: First, there is the moral code, which may be more or less explicitly formulated; second, there is the actual behaviour of those subject to the moral code; and third, there is the way in which individuals constitute themselves as moral subjects in relation to the moral code, or 'subjectivation.'<sup>420</sup> Whereas morality is associated with the history of different moral systems and the institutions that enforce them, ethics refers to the work of self-transformation that individuals perform on themselves. Ethics, understood as 'subjectivation,' contains four main elements: (1) the ethical substance, (2) the mode of subjection, (3) the ethical work, and (4) the *telos*. Ethical substance pertains to the substance of moral conduct (i.e. feelings, behaviour and intentions) and asks which part of the self should be subject to work on the self. The mode of subjection deals with how it is that subjects identify their obligations and asks which rules the subject should follow according to which reasons. Ethical work takes up the issue of the specification of the practices that the self must engage in in order to achieve its ethical ends. These first three practices are what Foucault refers to as ascetics, or *askesis*. The final aspect, *telos*, asks what mode of being, or living, constitutes the goal of this work and raises the question of what sort of person the subject desires to

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<sup>417</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 25.

<sup>418</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 26.

<sup>419</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 26.

<sup>420</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 29.

be when acting in a moral way.<sup>421</sup>

For Foucault, moral conduct is not to be equated with following rules and laws.

Rather, morality involves all of the four aspects delineated above and so, ethics and morality are constructed as interdependent:

In short, for an action to be ‘moral,’ it must not be reducible to an act or a series of acts, conforming to a rule, a law, or a value. Of course all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self. The latter is not simply, ‘self-awareness,’ but self formation as an ‘ethical subject,’ a process in which the individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve and transform himself. There is no specific moral action that does not refer to a unified moral conduct; no moral conduct that does not call for the forming of oneself as an ethical subject; and no forming of the ethical subject without ‘modes of subjectivation; and an ‘ascetics’ of ‘practices of the self’ that support them.<sup>422</sup>

Ethics is the work of self-transformation that subjects perform upon themselves.<sup>423</sup>

Foucault prioritises ethics because it is the aspect which is most liable to change, and it is in the area of the self-to-self relation that critical reflection occurs. An understanding of this aspect, according to Foucault, is absolutely crucial to the task of reconstitution. In substituting ‘a history of ethical problematisations based on the practices of self, for a history of systems of morality based, hypothetically, on interdictions,’<sup>424</sup> Foucault changes the ethical problematic from the moral law to what Grosz terms ‘ethical self-production.’<sup>425</sup> In this way, ethics proper is to be understood as the self’s relation to itself.<sup>426</sup> Yet, Foucault insists that ethics cannot ever be entirely disjoined from morality.<sup>427</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 28-31.

<sup>422</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 28.

<sup>423</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 29.

<sup>424</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 13.

<sup>425</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile bodies: toward a corporeal feminism*, 158

<sup>426</sup> Gary Gutting, *The Cambridge companion to Foucault* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 118.

<sup>427</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 28.

In ‘ethics-oriented moralities,’ Foucault argues that the practices of the self are not so much concerned with the approximation of the moral law as they are with the project of self invention: ‘To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of passing moments; but it is to take oneself as the object of a complex and difficult elaboration.’<sup>428</sup> Thus, in contrasting the ethical with the more juridical moral model, Foucault says: ‘What I mean by [‘arts of existence’]...are those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their life into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria.’<sup>429</sup> He poses the question of how it is that as modern subjects we ‘directly constitute our identity through some ethical techniques of the self which developed through antiquity down to now.’<sup>430</sup>

In the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality (The Use of Pleasure and The Care of the Self)*, Foucault sets out to examine the practices of the self developed through antiquity.<sup>431</sup> He argues that the Delphic principle of self-knowledge has come to function as an imperative and governs our modern practices. He attributes this in part to the influence of Descartes. The Delphic principle does not enter anew with Descartes though, but was already present in ancient Greek thought. The Delphic principle we have inherited from the Greeks replaced the earlier principle of ‘care for the self.’ Whereas, with Descartes, self-knowledge and ‘care of the self’ are separate, according to Foucault, for the ancient Greeks, the two principles were intertwined. The ‘care of the self’ was what formed the main rules for personal as well as social conduct. It was actually the principle of ‘care of the self’ that brought into action the Delphic principle as something like a form of technical and directive advice that the individual could be prescribed to follow when consulting the Delphic Oracle.

<sup>428</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘What is the Enlightenment?,’ ed. Paul Rabinow, *The Foucault Reader*, trans. Catherine Porter (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 311.

<sup>429</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 10-11.

<sup>430</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘The Political Technology of Individuals,’ eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, Patrick Hutton, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts, 1988), 146.

<sup>431</sup> Foucault also deals with the subject of care of the self in ‘The Political Technology of Individuals.’ I draw on both his work in *The History of Sexuality* as well as the former in this section.

Foucault argues that the ancient hierarchy of the two principles (care of self and know thyself) has now been inverted.<sup>432</sup> Nowadays the predominant principle is to know thyself. Foucault attributes this to a modern tendency to view ‘care of the self’ as immoral, narcissistic and as an escape from following rules. Although Foucault does not claim that there exists anything like a direct continuity between ancient Greece and the development of Christianity, his genealogy of sexuality does point towards some continuity between the roots of Greece with present day Western sexual ethics. Christianity took the ancient Greek notion of ‘care of the self’ and modified it in such a way as to make renouncing the self a condition for spiritual salvation and paradoxically located self-knowledge within the context of self-renunciation. Furthermore, Foucault argues that the very basis of our modern morality does involve at least a concern for the self in the sense that respect for an external law is opposed to those internalised understandings of morality connected to ‘care of the self.’ Yet, because modern Christian morality is ascetic, the self can be rejected and the Delphic principle obscures the principle of ‘care of the self.’ Finally, Descartes’ notion of the cogito has positioned the thinking subject as the basis of Western epistemology. According to Foucault, this raises the question of how the philosophy of the self, or indeed the practice of self constitution, might be understood differently if the ethics of self-care had prevailed. In the next section I turn to Foucault’s account of this issue.

### **Ethics as ‘care of the self’**

According to Foucault, we moderns find ourselves in a position in which religious systems, moral codes and irrefutable scientific truths no longer give shape to our lives. We are in the same position as the ancient Greeks for whom the question of ‘how should I live?’ could only be approached by cultivating a self-to-self relation in which the self was not a pre-given substance, but rather produced through a labour of care (*epimeleia*) and skill (*techne*). Thus, the sort of ethical practice that is called for by our contemporary situation is *aesthetic* in the sense that it shares with artistic practices the giving of form. By positing the individual as an artist in relation to the

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<sup>432</sup> Foucault, ‘The Political Technology of Individuals,’ 22.

living of her life, Foucault's intention is to construe the constitution of the ethical subject as not simply a matter of living by an established moral code. Rather, the aesthetic understanding of the subject is meant to present living life as a matter of giving one's life a 'style.'

Although Foucault derives the idea of aesthetics from the Ancient Greeks, O'Leary points out that Foucault does not take on all of the associated ideas.<sup>433</sup> For instance, Foucault does not retain the Greek idea that beauty necessarily coincides with the 'good.' For Foucault, the aesthetic is that sphere of life within which the individual works at developing techniques that will yield form to her life *and* her intersubjective relations. The goal is not merely to produce something that is beautiful to look at - as a piece of art is - but rather is about the cultivation of an attitude. The cultivated attitude is not only one that is to be taken up in relation to the other, but is taken up in relation to one's own life, to one's self - as to a material which can be formed as well as transformed. Life understood as something that is to be formed and transformed, signals that the subject has no ultimate purpose, no pre-given shape, and ultimately, no justification. If the subject is neither given nor a necessity, then what is it?

The subject is an *accomplishment* and it is only in as much as the subject is not pre-given, but is something to be achieved, that the subject is to be thought of as having a future and thus, being capable of (self)-transformation. It is here that we can see clearly that Foucault moves beyond the reactionary force of resistance, the place where Brown identifies a severe and insurmountable shortcoming in Foucault's earlier work. The limitations, which Brown had identified in Foucault's notion of resistance, are now opened up into an experimental ethics of becoming, the aim of which is: 'the creation of new forms of life, relationships, friendships....through our ethical and political choices.'<sup>434</sup> For now, I do not address Foucault's reference to our 'choices.' This is a problem that I deal with only in the next chapter. For now, I simply move in the direction Foucault is taking us in the development of an ethics

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<sup>433</sup> Timothy O'Leary. *Foucault and the Art of Ethics* (London and New York: Continuum, 2002),

<sup>434</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,' ed. Paul Rabinow ed., trans. Robert Hurley, et al., *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 164.



that places the self at its centre. This ethics of becoming can be viewed as a shift away from the politics of reaction, which in Brown is *ressentiment*, to what Fanon terms ‘actional’: ‘There is always resentment in a reaction....To educate man to be actional is the prime task of him, who having taken thought, prepares to act.’<sup>435</sup> To be ‘actional’ is to individuate, to locate in the individual a capacity for action. If we cannot internalise the moral code nor seek liberation in our identities, Foucault establishes a reflexive figure: ‘The relations we have to have with ourselves are not ones of identity, rather, they must be relationships of differentiation, of creation, of innovation.’<sup>436</sup>

According to Foucault, ancient ethics demands an aesthetic regulation of *action* rather than a rigorous codification of individuals on the basis of the choices they make. This aesthetic regulation is dependent upon varying and variable circumstances to do with needs, appropriateness, social status, health and climate. Behaviour is to be adjusted to the variability of circumstances rather than obedience to the law:

In this form of morality, the individual did not make himself into an ethical subject by universalizing the principles that informed his action; on the contrary, he did so by means of an attitude and a quest that individualised his action, modulated it, and perhaps even gave him a special brilliance by virtue of the rational and deliberate structure his action manifested.<sup>437</sup>

The subject’s ‘quest’ for ‘individualised...action’ does not signal that the *will* of the subject has in some way transcended existing power structures. Quite the opposite, what this points to is a complete contextualisation of action and circumstances. Therefore, particular acts, rather than being swallowed up by a universal law, in Foucault, are submitted to the complex stylisations of existence – dietetics, economics and courtship. That is, the individual makes ‘himself’ into an ethical subject by reflecting on his situation (social status, health, climate) whilst considering his needs. The Foucaultian individual is deeply embedded rather than

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<sup>435</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 222.

<sup>436</sup> Foucault, ‘Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,’ 166.

<sup>437</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 62.

ahistorical and because of this, a rational, universal application of obedience to the law is simply not appropriate to guide action.

Ethics should be understood as aesthetics on the basis of its technical and ascetic modes, rather than on the basis of any striving for unity and purity. That is to say, ethics is aesthetic on the basis of it being about giving something form.

Therefore, although Foucault has taken his direction from the ancient Greeks, he does not take on their notion that beauty necessarily coincides with the 'good.' In contrast to the Greeks, Foucault views the aesthetic sphere as that place within which the individual works to develop those techniques that will yield a form to his life. The working out of techniques for living a good life necessarily includes relations with others. The aim of this work is thus not like that of art, to create something that is desirable to look at. Rather the aim is to cultivate the *attitudes* necessary to create a good life. This calls on the subject to relate to his life and himself as to a *material* that can be formed and transformed.<sup>438</sup>

If the life of the subject is material that can be formed and transformed, this must be an indication that for Foucault neither the subject, nor the life of the subject, has any ultimate (pre) given shape, purpose or indeed, justification. The subject as *form* has a history, unlike the subject as *substance*, and therefore, has a future insofar as it is transformable. Now, this would seem to raise the following question: Why should I live my life in one particular way rather than another? It is exactly for this reason that Foucault sees it as necessary to develop techniques to work on the transformation of the form and to reflect upon the end – the *telos* to which the subject directs his efforts. The aim, or *telos*, of Foucault's ethics is freedom. Freedom for Foucault though is not an end state, but is rather to be thought of as a sort of continual practice. It is an understanding of ethics as *praxis* and this idea I develop further in the next chapter. Before I move on to this though, in the next section I end with examining some of the feminist criticisms of Foucault's approach to ethics. My goal is to begin to clarify my vision of a Foucaultian ethics of *praxis* as an appropriate avenue by which to address the problematics of feminist identity politics

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<sup>438</sup> 'Form' is not to be confused with substance, the latter of which Foucault definitively rejects.

identified in Chapter Two. Although there is a developing acceptance regarding the usefulness of Foucault's late work among feminist theorists, in what follows, I look briefly at two feminist critiques of this later work in order to draw out what I think are the strengths in Foucault's ethics for my own purposes.<sup>439</sup>

### **'Care of the self' and feminist identity politics**

Braidotti has expressed serious reservations that Foucault's later work on ancient Greek ethics could be of any serious use for feminists.<sup>440</sup> She concedes that in this body of work Foucault does make an important contribution with regard to the issues of the status of the subject, identity and the role of truth as a form of power through his critique of power. She argues though that he very unhelpfully holds on to the ancient Greek association between the 'care of the self' and political life. According to Braidotti, this connection is one that is derived through the male body and maintaining it amounts to an idealisation of masculinity.

Braidotti argues that what Foucault derives from the ancient Greeks - in relation to governing oneself, managing one's estate, and participating in the administration of the city - merely emphasizes the key value of 'ethical virility' as the ideal on which the system as a whole rests.<sup>441</sup> In turn, what this implies is the perfect coincidence between one's male sex and an imaginary construction of masculine sexuality. Moreover, Foucault stresses the accordance of both maleness and masculine sexuality to the ruling social representations of what ought to be the universal ethical standard. Thus, the male body is all one with the body politic.<sup>442</sup>

It is Braidotti's view that an emphasis on sexual difference provides superior theoretical and practical tools for the project of redefining ethics in a way that exceeds the modern (liberal) conception of the subject.<sup>443</sup> Braidotti views Foucault as

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<sup>439</sup> See for instance McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault and Embodied Subjectivity*; Diane Taylor and Karen Vintges (eds) *Feminism and the Final Foucault* (Illinois: Illinois University Press, 2004).

<sup>440</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: embodiment and sexual difference in contemporary feminist theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>441</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 170.

<sup>442</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 128-129.

<sup>443</sup> Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, 124-135.

standing in stark contrast to such a project. Braidotti is not mistaken; Foucault's 'care of the self' *is* derived from male subjectivity. Foucault does not consider gender difference as a category in his account of political and ethical individuality, and Braidotti is correct to surmise that for the purposes of the feminist project of *difference*, Foucault is likely to have limited usefulness. However, my project begins at the limits of feminist projects of gender difference.

Rozmarin<sup>444</sup> also offers a trenchant critique that draws on Foucault's later work on ethics. She takes issue with what Foucault defines as the necessary relations at work in 'care for the self' and care for others, which Foucault delineates in the following passage:

But if you take proper care for yourself, that is, if you know ontologically what you are, if you know what you are capable of, if you know what it means for you to be a citizen of a city, to be the master of a household in an *oikos*, if you know what things you should and should not fear, if you know what you can responsibly hope for and on the other hand, what things should not matter to you, if you know finally, that you should not be afraid of death – if you know all this, you cannot abuse your power over others.<sup>445</sup>

Rozmarin views Foucault's assumption here as one that simply cannot be accepted by feminists. For her, Foucault is defining the basic ethical problem as that of determining how to avoid the misuse of power. For her, it is obvious that in following the ancient Greeks, Foucault thinks of individuals as fundamentally having power over others. Rozmarin argues that in a feminist context, any assumption that individuals hold power over others simply cannot be taken for granted since in many contexts women are deprived of any social power. Thus, according to Rozmarin, the fundamental question of power should be: 'What are the material and cultural conditions that enable women to adopt an ethos through which they can gain the power to govern their lives, actions, and practices of self-knowledge?'<sup>446</sup>

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<sup>444</sup> Miri Rozmarin, 'Power, Freedom and Individuality: Foucault and Sexual Difference,' *Human Studies*, Volume 28, Number 1 (2005), 10.

<sup>445</sup> Foucault quoted in Rozmarin, 'Power, Freedom and Individuality: Foucault and Sexual Difference,' 9.

<sup>446</sup> Rozmarin, 'Power, Freedom and Individuality: Foucault and Sexual Difference,' 10.

I accept Rozmarin's criticisms of Foucault insofar as they are contained within the feminist project of gender difference. For the purposes of thinking through the limits of difference feminism in the context of feminist identity politics, and in particular the problematic of organising and working across differences from *within* the category of 'women' (diversity feminism), defining the basic ethical problem as one to do with power over others, and how to avoid the misuse of that power, is imperative. If women do not all belong equally and unproblematically to a universal category, but from within that singular category coexist in multiple subject/identity positions, then feminism cannot think of itself as somehow devoid, or above power.

Foucault posits an ethical subject that is neither the mere imbiber of universal moral laws nor completely liberated from the historical, social and temporal context of her identity. The subject is neither the unencumbered self of liberal theory, but nor is the subject the fully encumbered self of essentialist identity. This is the ethical situation that I am trying to develop, one that provides an ethical framework that places the individual at its centre - neither enmeshing her in the internalisation of a universal moral code nor freeing her completely of her identity.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I have made a distinction between the terms ethics and morality in order to signal the direction I take Brown and Butler to have been pointing towards in the previous chapter. On the basis of this distinction, I have drawn on a debate in liberal theory that I take as broadly paralleling feminist identity politics. In order to highlight the central role of the inner life of the self, something that I argue both Brown and Butler also centre, I have looked at Sandel who draws out the inner life of the agent as a matter of self-knowledge and self-reflection. Sandel's self though seems to simply 'turns its lights' upon itself in order to reflect upon itself as an agent. Yet if self-reflection is what is necessary to carry out transformative work on the self, we need to know what happens in the 'turn.' In order to elaborate on what the nature of this relationship we must have with ourselves, I turned to Foucault's later work on ethics. I argued that Foucault can be drawn on to elaborate Sandel's self-reflective

self. I argued that what we find in Foucault is that when the self ‘turns its lights’ inwards, self-knowledge and self-reflection are mediated through ‘care of the self’ and that this offers a deeper understanding of the inner life of the self and its relation to the project of self-transformation. It is in precisely this direction that I would like to develop. Foucault’s work here establishes a new mode of relating to the self in which freeing oneself of identity is not what is stressed. Rather, Foucault insists that the relations we hold with ourselves are not those of identity, but ones of ‘differentiation, of creation, of innovation.’<sup>447</sup>

Developing an ethics along the lines of Foucault raises two issues though, firstly, to return again to Brown’s issue, what direction does freedom take? How can we imagine an ethics of self-reflective *praxis* in the context of feminist identity politics? Does it ignore the issue raised by Brown of the vicissitudes of *ressentiment*? Secondly, according to my reading of Sandel, individual self-reflection is necessarily intersubjective. Foucault gives us a self that is capable of taking on the self-transformative work necessary to participate in an ethics of *praxis*, but what seems to be missing here is the problematic of the ‘other.’ Rajchman suggests that ‘what is most ‘difficult’ in the work of Foucault: the least resolved, the more open’ is the problematic of friendship.<sup>448</sup> What can be said about the ethical relationship the individual has to others? In order to develop the notion of an ethics that is able to address the issues of the problematic of the self in identity politics, we must know what the relationship the self has to others is like. Is it a non-reductive one? Does Foucault’s ethics give an adequate account of the intersubjective context of identity? It is to these issues that I turn in the next chapter.

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<sup>447</sup> Foucault, ‘Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity,’ 166.

<sup>448</sup> John Rajchman, *Truth and Eros* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 14.

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## Ethics as *praxis*: the self, transformation, desire, vision and the good

### Introduction

In the previous chapter I argued that there is a distinction to be made between the terms ethics and morality. I made this distinction very broadly and then made it more particular through Sandel and Foucault. Both of these understandings of ethics point to what I have referred to as an ethics of becoming, or *praxis*. The subject of an ethics of *praxis* is not a priori to context, having worked out in advance both needs and wants. An ethics of *praxis* is expressive of a shift in the ethical problematic from adherence to a universal moral code to a more protean understanding of a mode of being. This is in keeping with shifting the analysis of the political subject of identity politics into a more psychological and less institutional line of enquiry, which I showed both Brown and Butler to be pointing towards in Chapter Three. It is a shift away from those narrower conceptions of the self in identity politics. Sandel posits the central role of the inner life – self-knowledge and self-reflection. Foucault’s experimental *praxis* extends on this by incorporating into the role of self-reflection, not only self-knowledge, but also self-care. This latter notion – ‘care of the self’ - stresses the sort of relation the self must have with itself - it is a relation ‘of differentiation, of creation, of innovation.’

Chapter Five primarily pushes further in the direction that Chapter Four has taken. My aim is to bring Foucault’s work into dialogue with the problematic of identity politics that I have already defined in Chapter Two. Namely, that identity politics is about difficult and personal work, which the self undertakes in tandem with differentially placed others. I have defined this work as practical work (*praxis*) in the sense that it involves the self in relation to itself, in relation to others, to values and to projects. This sort of work necessitates a turn inwards. The turn is one that is

enabled by the self's relation to others and is undertaken for the purpose of being able to work *better* with others. Therefore, the self is not left unchanged, but is transformed by and through this inward turn.

This chapter is organised as follows: In the first section, I explore in more detail Foucault's study of the Greek and Greco-Roman practices of the self as elaborated in his *The History of Sexuality, volume III, The Care of the Self*. I pay careful attention to how Foucault elaborates his ethics as *praxis*. This involves looking carefully at 'care of the self' (*epimeleia heatou*) and drawing out how this entails hard work – there are many tasks which the self must intentionally undertake here. In the second section, I focus on those elements in Foucault's understanding of ethics to do with transformation of the self and show how such an ethics deals with the issue of alterity in a manner that is constructive within the problematics of identity politics.<sup>449</sup> Due to the collective nature of the practical work of identity politics, the issue of alterity is central. Poststructural feminism has argued that any recourse to a shared essential identity is not a viable basis for shared political projects, so the following questions must be posed to an ethics of *praxis*: How does it deal with the issue of alterity? Is it apparent how the individual is to maintain a non-reductive relation to others? In short, how does the agent undertake the hard work of collective projects with different others? I move to look at how Foucault's aesthetic ethics accounts for alterity by looking at the most common critiques of his ethics. In the third section, I return to the starting point of identity politics, namely to the issue of *ressentiment*. Although Foucault's 'care of the self' does not entirely neglect the issue raised by Brown (*ressentiment*) of the presumption of the direction that the *telos* takes, I argue it could be strengthened. In order to do this, I draw on some of Iris Murdoch's work to show how within an ethics of transformation (*praxis*) this problem could be elaborated. I conclude that Foucault's ethics as *praxis* is heading in the same direction that I have suggested Butler is pointing towards – namely, an exploration

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<sup>449</sup> I am understanding alterity in the way that I take Foucault to. That is, alterity is not simply a synonym for difference. Rather, alterity is otherness. Therefore, alterity does not refer only to external differences, but includes all that is distinct about the other. This signals that the other may be more like me than I had anticipated and likewise, I might discover in the intersubjective encounter that I am unexpectedly other to myself. Consequently, identity, in light of alterity, may need to be transformed. Alterity functions on both the individual level as well as the collective level.



of virtue ethics as a way to further develop this project.

## Self-care and alterity

As discussed in the previous chapter, ‘care of the self’ implies that Foucault’s ethics is to be understood as *praxis*. That is, ‘care of self’ is not intended to only refer to a general attitude or unfocussed attention, but rather that it is also time-consuming labour that is to be undertaken by the self. Foucault uses the Greek term *epimeleia* to describe this labour, which designates not only a preoccupation, but an entire set of occupations, which encompass all those activities of the head of the house, those tasks of a ruler over his subjects, and the care to be given to the sick.<sup>450</sup> In regards to the self in particular, *epimeleia* implies that this labour is time-consuming.

‘Care for the self’ is a laborious activity that takes time and as such one of the main problems encountered in the cultivation of the self, is how to determine just how much time one should devote to the task. That is, should one set aside only a few moments of each day? Should the early morning, or the late evening be set aside for introspection, for the memorisation of useful principles, or for reflection on the foregoing day? Should one interrupt one’s usual activities from time to time to go off on a retreat to commune with one self, to look over one’s life as a whole? At what point in one’s career should one wait to undertake such self-reflective activities? Should this time be undertaken at the beginning of a career, or at the end, or somewhere in between?

The time that one spends cultivating oneself is filled up with exercises, practical tasks and a vast array of activities. Cultivating the self is not about resting. It is not to enter into a state of passivity, but rather, activity. There is a multiplicity of considerations to be undertaken. For instance, in caring for the body, one undertakes health and exercise regimes. One meditates, reads and reflects on readings through careful note taking. Notes are re-read and reflected upon at a later date. In short, one

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<sup>450</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 50.

‘retreats within oneself’<sup>451</sup> and this inward retreat is an on-going effort, the goal of which is to reactivate general principles, build persuasive arguments and to refrain from becoming angry at ‘others, at providence or at things.’<sup>452</sup>

An important element of the labour of self-care is also the conversations that one has with friends, confidants, and guides or directors. These conversations are undertaken in person as well as through correspondence. The purpose of these interchanges is for one to reveal ‘the state of one’s soul’ as well as to seek and to give advice.<sup>453</sup> The latter is of benefit to the giver of advice for through this exercise he actualises himself. But it is also of benefit to the receiver. Interaction and correspondence with others constitutes an exercise in the cultivation of the self and is therefore also a way of caring for others. Foucault puts it so: ‘around care of the self, there developed an entire activity of speaking and writing in which the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others were linked together.’<sup>454</sup>

This reciprocal exchange with the other, which one needs to take part in, was not merely a side effect of ‘care of the self.’ Rather, it was integral to it. Indeed, one was considered as exercising a right when one elicited the help of others in care for the self. And in turn, one was obligated to reciprocate when others solicited one’s assistance. It is here that one of the most important aspects of the activity of ‘care of the self’ is to be found, for it ‘constituted, not an exercise in solitude, but a true *social practice*’ (my italics).<sup>455</sup>

Foucault writes that ‘care for the self’ is social in several respects. It took place in the more or less institutionalised structures of the neo-Pythagorean communities, or the Epicurean groups, in which the more advanced members took on the task of tutoring the rest. Tutoring was done either on an individual basis or collectively. One could also attend to oneself in school-like settings. Foucault notes that Epictetus, for instance, taught in this sort of a setting. Both private citizens wishing to prepare for

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<sup>451</sup> Aurelius quoted in Foucault, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality* 3, 51.

<sup>452</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 51.

<sup>453</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 51.

<sup>454</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 51.

<sup>455</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 51.

life, as well as others intending to train as professional philosophers, were trained in ‘spiritual direction.’<sup>456</sup> In Roman aristocratic society, philosophers were taken on to serve families as private consultants.

Attention to the self did not only depend on schools, lectures and professionals for its base. It also found support in familial relations, friendship and obligation. As already pointed out above, when one appealed to the assistance of another in the task of caring for the self, one exercised a right. And in extending assistance, as well as receiving the lessons the other gave, one was performing a duty. This exchange in the interplay of ‘care of the self’ and the assistance of others serves to strengthen and deepen relations: ‘[t]he care of the self – or the attention one devotes to the care of others should take of themselves – appears then as an intensification of social relations.’<sup>457</sup> Foucault presents Seneca’s letters to Lucilius as an example of the deepening of a pre-existing relationship. In these correspondences, gradually, the spiritual guidance initiated by the older Seneca, transforms into a shared experience which both benefit from. Seneca writes to Lucilius: ‘I claim you for myself; you are my handiwork’ and adds: ‘I am cheering on one who is in the race and so in turn cheers me on.’<sup>458</sup> Foucault’s point here is that ‘care of the self’ is inextricably linked to ‘a soul service’ which includes exchanges with the other in a system of reciprocal obligations, the point of which is transformation of the self.<sup>459</sup>

Although ‘care of the self’ is a social practice which is the intertwinement of the self and the other in its practice, the individual still remains primary. The work of transformation of the self is carried out on and within the self. Although it is worth emphasising that Foucault is not now to be taken as formulating a Levinsonian-style ethics in which the self is only called into being by the other. Foucault is very careful about delineating the boundaries of this connection.

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<sup>456</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 52.

<sup>457</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 53.

<sup>458</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 54.

<sup>459</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 54.

## **‘Needful’ bodies and souls**

In ancient Greece, the ‘care of the self’ is closely correlated with medicine. The focus of ‘care of the self’ is where the ills of the body and soul both communicate as well as contaminate each other. It is that point where ‘the bad habits of the soul can entail physical miseries, while the excesses of the body manifest and maintain the failings of the soul.’<sup>460</sup> The interconnectivity of body and soul meant that if one did not want an ill soul to infect the body, one had to be sure to improve the soul and vice versa. For an adult, the body that needs caring for is not a young body. Rather, it is now a ‘fragile, undermined body, threatened by petty miseries – a body that in turn threatens the soul.’<sup>461</sup> This concern for the health of the body took the form of fear of excess, economy of regimen, attention to dysfunction, and a taking into account of climate, season, diet and way of life. In short, all the factors that might disturb the proper balance of the body, and therefore, the soul are to be taken into consideration.

The connection between the health of the body and the soul, on the basis of a harmonisation between medicine and ethics, Foucault argues, led to a very important consequence. In acknowledging oneself as either being ill, or in danger of becoming ill, the practice of the self implies that one should not only consider oneself imperfect, ignorant, in need of correction, training and instruction, but also as someone who requires treatment by either oneself or someone else who is competent.<sup>462</sup> Everyone needs to make the discovery that they are needful. We all are likely to need medicine or competent assistance. It is here, in the realisation of one’s weakness and needfulness, that ‘philosophic life begins.’<sup>463</sup>

The establishment of a relation to oneself as ill is all the more necessary in regards to the well-being of the soul since maladies of the soul, unlike those of the body, are not visible. Maladies of the soul are often not readily apparent and therefore, can persist

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<sup>460</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 56.

<sup>461</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 57.

<sup>462</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 57.

<sup>463</sup> Epictetus quoted in Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 57.

for a long time without being detected and can blind those whom they afflict.<sup>464</sup>

Unhealthy individuals may not know they are afflicted, which can cause ills of the soul to be mistaken for ‘virtues (anger for courage, amorous passion for friendship, envy for emulation, cowardice for prudence).’<sup>465</sup> The aim of the physician is, firstly, to make the patient well and, secondly, to make sure that the ill person is at the very least aware that he is ill. Therefore, recognising oneself as needful is the very first step towards self-knowledge.

## **Self-knowledge and ‘care of the self’**

As discussed above, the practices of the self are both personal as well as social and self-knowledge occupies a central role. Furthermore, self-knowledge does not merely amount to an invocation of the Delphic principle, but instead is complex and takes the form of precise instructions, specified examinations and a code of exercises.

‘Testing procedures’ are tests that allow the individual to establish self-mastery by progressively testing what it is possible to live without.<sup>466</sup> The purpose of these tests is not simply renunciation per se, but rather to cultivate independence through establishing what is superfluous and what is not. Foucault illustrates this by looking at the example of Epictetus. Epictetus, whom already practiced a Spartan diet, took, on certain days, a reduced ration of food with the aim of seeing how much his pleasure would be diminished. The point of this sort of reductive testing was to demonstrate that it is always possible to have access to what is strictly necessary, and that one should guard against being apprehensive of the thought of possible future privations. Foucault points out that this should not be understood as sanctioning a withdrawal from oneself, or the world. Rather, one should ‘do what the crowd does, but in a different way.’<sup>467</sup> This ‘different way’ is the way that one has learned ahead of time through voluntary exercises, which enables one to maintain a detached and

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<sup>464</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 58.

<sup>465</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 58.

<sup>466</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 58.

<sup>467</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 60.

independent mind in any (social) situation.

These practical tests are to be carried out in conjunction with rigorous self-examination. What this entailed was morning examination, the purpose of which was to review what the tasks and responsibilities of the coming day were to be, as well as an evening exam, which was devoted to reviewing the foregoing day. The latter examination, although suggestive of a division of the self into an accusing judge and a guilty subject, Foucault argues, is actually better understood as something more akin to an inspection. In describing this self-examination, Seneca employs the words: ‘scrutinize,’ ‘to shake out,’ ‘to inspect,’ and to ‘remeasure.’<sup>468</sup> The self-to-self relation established through this examination, according to Foucault, is not a judicial one, but rather is like an inspector who is inspecting a piece of work, or task, that has been accomplished: ‘The fault is not reactivated by the examination in order to determine a culpability or stimulate a feeling of remorse, but in order to strengthen, on the basis of the recapitulated and reconsidered verification of a failure, the rational equipment that ensures wise behaviour.’<sup>469</sup>

Added to all of the foregoing is the labour one undertakes on oneself as object. This task is more than a test that measures what one is capable of. It is also more than a matter of assessing if one is at fault in regards to the rules of conduct. The task of thinking of oneself as the object of thought is a consistent attitude that one adopts towards oneself. It is not something that one exercises at intervals. Epictetus uses the metaphor of a ‘night watchman’ when he says that one should keep watch over what enters the gates of the cities and houses.<sup>470</sup> Epictetus further elaborates how one should exercise on oneself the same functions of an assayer. That is, similar to a moneychanger, one should not accept any coin before having ascertained its worth. This is not to be understood as Socrates’ aphorism: ‘An unexamined life is not worth living.’ Foucault contends that Epictetus intends something very different. Epictetus’ examination is one that is meant to deal with representations in a manner that tests them in order to make a distinction between them so as to avoid the tendency to

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<sup>468</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 61-62.

<sup>469</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 62.

<sup>470</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 63.

accept initial understandings, or interpretations which may be incorrect:

We ought not to accept a mental representation unsubjected to examination, but should say, ‘Wait, allow me to see who you are and whence you came’ (just as the night-watch say, ‘Show me your tokens’).<sup>471</sup>

One’s aim is not to uncover an original meaning behind the representation, but to evaluate one’s relationship with what is represented in order to accept *in relation* to one’s self only those representations that depend on the subject’s voluntary and rational choice. That is, one should only accept what is one’s *intentional* choice. Representations that are outside of the understanding of the individual are to be rejected as inappropriate objects of desire. The inspection is a ‘test of power and a guarantee of freedom.’<sup>472</sup> This testing is the way by which the individual ensures that no attachments are formed that are not intentional. Constant scrutiny must be exercised over representations – not in order to uncover origins, or hidden meanings, but in order to assess the relationship between oneself and that which is represented.

The individual is in no sense controlled by the representation, nor vice versa. Rather, it is precisely at the point where the individual approves or disapproves of the representation that the locus of control is to be found. It is the inspection that both tests the power, as well as guarantees the freedom, of the individual. ‘Care of the self’ is a very personal mode of political resistance. It is both the motivating foundation and the articulation of the embodied and desiring subject.

The shared goal of all of these practices of the self is the ‘conversion of the self.’<sup>473</sup> ‘Conversion of the self’ requires that one shifts both one’s activities and attention to ceaselessly caring for the self. This is not to be understood as implying that all else should be given up and that one should devote oneself entirely to oneself. Rather, it should be understood as a shift in activity. That is, in the activities that one should engage in, one must realise that the main objective one must set for oneself is to be

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<sup>471</sup> Epictetus quoted in Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 63-64.

<sup>472</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 64.

<sup>473</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 64.

‘sought within oneself, in the relation of oneself to oneself.’<sup>474</sup> This self to self relation is the final point of the ‘conversion’ and all of the practices of the self belong to an ethics of control. It seems a fair question to raise at this point if this is to be taken as implying that this is, in some way, an agonistic struggle of resistance against force.

Foucault addresses the concern of agonism, noting that although the relation to the self is commonly presented in juridical terms, it is also defined as a concrete relationship that allows for the self to take pleasure in itself. Thus, the relation that one has to oneself is not one characterised by having overcome something forcefully and thereby taken possession of it. Instead, it is about having succeeded in gaining access to oneself, one now is taking pleasure in oneself. For Seneca this pleasure is not defined by something external to the self. Instead, it arises out of the self and from within the self. Again, Foucault quotes Seneca writing to Lucilius:

*Disce gaudere*, learn how to feel joy, I do not wish you ever to be deprived of gladness. I would have it born in your house; and it is born there, if only it is inside of you....for it will never fail you when once you have found its source....look toward the true good, and rejoice only in that which comes from your own store [*de tuo*]. But what do I mean by ‘your own store’? I mean your very self and the best part of you.<sup>475</sup>

Hadot points out that in this passage, Seneca is opposing joy with pleasure and that Foucault is mistaken to construe the joy Seneca writes of as ‘a form of pleasure.’<sup>476</sup> Hadot’s more important point is that Seneca finds joy, not in the self, but in ‘that best part’ of the self. What this suggests is that the self does not reach for a realm in which it is self-satisfied, rather the labour of caring for the self is an on-going task. Each morning and each evening the self undertakes the labour of its self-examination for the body and the soul are fragile and always in danger of succumbing to ill health. The conversion to self is the striving always for ‘that best part of the self.’ It is not to uncover, or discover, some hidden truth about the self.

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<sup>474</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 64-65.

<sup>475</sup> Seneca quoted in Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 66-67.

<sup>476</sup> Hadot quoted in Arnold I. Davidson, ‘Ethics as ascetics: Foucault, the history of ethics, and ancient thought,’ Gary Gutting (ed), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 129.



The preceding analysis of Foucault's self-formation confirms that the self's aesthetics of existence is practicable. That is, self-formation is a difficult task that requires the self to remain engaged in ongoing practical work. The next issue is to look at the extent to which care for the self is ethical in respect to the issue of alterity and difference. How does Foucault's self attend to the other? Is there a tension between a transformative *praxis* and the ethical obligation of alterity? What seems clear from the preceding analysis is that for Foucault an action is ethical insofar as it maintains and secures freedom for the self. Freedom is not unrestrained though for it is constrained by ethics. That is, freedom is ethical only when it is practiced in a *deliberate* way and given a deliberate form. This conception of ethics implies that what the individual *does* with its freedom is important. What the individual does with that freedom affects others. We must pay attention to how we constitute ourselves as moral subjects of our own actions. 'Care of the self' appears to regulate the individual's conduct towards others, but what if the only way to secure one's freedom is by infringing on someone else's? What if instead of using freedom in a reciprocal strengthening of someone else's, one persists in caring only for oneself? Foucault himself voiced this very concern when he asked: 'Are we able to have an ethics of acts and pleasures which would be able to take into account the pleasure of the other? Is the pleasure of the other something that can be integrated in our pleasure, without reference either to law, to marriage, to I don't know what?'<sup>477</sup>

In the next section, I turn to these questions and look at the extent to which it can be argued that Foucault's study of ancient Greek care of the self can be defended as supplying a self that is able to take up a non-reductive relation in a context of alterity. In order to do this, I look at some of the most common critiques that have been voiced against Foucault's aestheticised account of ethics.

## **Alterity and 'care of the self'**

Foucault's emphasis on the ancient Greek practices of aesthetic self-formation has

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<sup>477</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Foucault Reader*, Paul Rabinow, editor (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1986), 346.

been popularly critiqued as an abdication of responsibility and an aggrandizement of the self. Many have been critical of his late ethical project for purportedly pursuing individual satisfaction at the expense of collective political projects. What all these critiques seem to raise as a concern is the issue of how an ethic that is centred on self-concern effects collective political engagement. How does a self that undertakes such a radical inward turn contend with the issue of alterity? Is Foucault's development of the Greek concern for self-constitution not simply a version of self-absorption? How does the radically autonomous individual take up a relationship of responsibility to any other person? Most worrying of all, is there not a very real danger that aesthetisation of all aspects of life leads inevitably to meaninglessness? This is voiced very forcefully by Eagleton when he writes:

The wholesale anesthetization of society had found its grotesque apotheosis for a brief moment in fascism, with its panoply of myths, symbols and orgiastic spectacles, its repressive expressivity, its appeals to passion, racial intuition, instinctual judgment, the sublimity of self-sacrifice and the pulse of blood. But in the post-war years a different form of anesthetization was also to saturate the entire cult of hedonism and technique, its reifying of the signifier and displacement of discursive meaning with random intensities.....we were now, as we were told, in the era of postmodernism.<sup>478</sup>

Critics like Eagleton, along with Wolin and others,<sup>479</sup> view Foucault's ethical project as achieving the erasure of the boundary between the aesthetic domain and other spheres of life. For them, aesthetics is in fact, the opposite of ethics. In this section I look at some of the main critiques of Foucault's ethics and argue that by reading Foucault too narrowly, they gloss over and miss some of the more subtle and important points of his work. In fact, they miss that, quite to the contrary, Foucault does not represent aesthetics as oppositionally positioned to ethics, but that it is the necessary, albeit insufficient, condition of an ethical self that can approach alterity in not only a non-reductive manner, but as the transformative task that it is.

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<sup>478</sup> Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 373.

<sup>479</sup> See for instance Alix Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Christopher Norris, *Uncritical Theory: postmodernism, intellectuals and the Gulf War* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1992); Lois McNay, *Foucault and Feminism: Power, Gender and the Self* (Oxford: Polity, 1992).

## The critiques of self-creation as ethics

### The self-created 'monad'

According to some critics, Foucault's aesthetic self cannot yield a 'politics of alliances' and contribute in any meaningful way to 'coalition building' which are the type of politics necessary to respond to the unfreedom of our time.<sup>480</sup> Theoretical projects like Foucault's, they contend, 'de-emphasize community and intersubjectivity,' favouring instead 'highly individualised modes of being.'<sup>481</sup> According to Eagleton, 'Foucault's vigorously self-mastering individual remains wholly monadic.'<sup>482</sup> He is closed in on himself and devoid of any capacity for emotional intimacy or community ties. Eagleton argues, therefore, that in the ethical world created by Foucault, society is little more than 'an assemblage of autonomous self-disciplining agents, with no sense that their self-realisation might flourish within bonds of mutuality.'<sup>483</sup>

There are two aspects to Eagleton's critique which are worth examining in more detail in order to tease out those relevant strands in Foucault to do with the issue of the self in relation to the collective. Firstly, on the one hand, Eagleton takes issue with Foucault's 'monadic' self and secondly, on the other hand, he is critical of what he perceives as Foucault's lack of recognition of the interconnection between self-realisation, mutuality and collective action.

The first element of Eagleton's critique is sustainable only if one overlooks Foucault's insistence on the impossibility of a subject position ever being located (or locateable) outside a given regime of power. If it is possible to overlook this central point, then this particular critique is not misplaced. But since one of Foucault's main premises is indeed that regimes of power function as the very conditions of the possibility of subjectivity per se, then I think it fair to surmise that Eagleton is here

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<sup>480</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (London: Macmillan, 1991), 290.

<sup>481</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, 289.

<sup>482</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 393.

<sup>483</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 393.

mistaken. Let us recall that, according to Foucault, it is regimes of power that always lead to the failure of achieving the goal of preventing intersubjective bonds to disrupt the regime of power. Therefore, contrary to Eagleton's critique, the aim of Foucault's 'aesthetics of existence' is best understood as having to do with shaping oneself to the extent that is possible from *within* the regime of power. Foucault himself argues that this is a matter of:

...showing how social mechanisms....have been able to work, how forms of repression and constraint have acted, and then, starting from here, it seems to me, one [leaves]....to the people themselves, knowing all the above, the frontier possibility of self-determination and the choice of their own existence.<sup>484</sup>

Positing the argument that there is no possibility of escaping the effects of power, is not the same as construing subjectivation as subjection. It is always possible that there are 'practices of liberation, of freedom, as in Antiquity, starting of course from a certain number of rules, styles and conventions that are found in culture.'<sup>485</sup>

With regards to the latter element of Eagleton's critique - the connection between self-care, mutuality and collective action – Eagleton is not incorrect to point out that although Foucault emphasises that practices of the self include the forming and developing of 'symmetrical and reciprocal relationships,' this does not automatically translate into the establishment of 'bonds of mutuality.'<sup>486</sup> Yet, as Bennett points out, this does not mean that Foucault's aesthetic self cannot engage in collective practices of mobilisation for reasons other than self-realisation.<sup>487</sup> Along similar lines, Connolly defends understanding Foucault's aesthetics of existence as the means through which the individual goes about cultivating and improving the quality and openness of its connectedness to others.<sup>488</sup> An aesthetics of existence, according to Connolly, makes it possible to cultivate a 'generous sensibility' and opens up 'new

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<sup>484</sup> Michel Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence,' in Foucault Live, trans. John Johnston and ed. Sylvester (New York: Semiotext(e), 1989), 312.

<sup>485</sup> Foucault, 'An Aesthetics of Existence,' 313.

<sup>486</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 3, The Care of the Self*, 182, 213.

<sup>487</sup> Jane Bennett, 'How is It, Then, That We Still Remain Barbarians?': Foucault, Schiller, and the Aestheticisation of Ethics,' *Political Theory*, Volume 24, Number 4 (Nov., 1996), 661.

<sup>488</sup> William Connolly, 'Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault,' *Political Theory*, Vol. 21 (August 1993), 110.

possibilities in social relations....that enable a larger variety of identities to coexist in relations of 'studied' indifference on some occasions, alliance on others, and agonistic respect during periods of rivalry and contestation.<sup>489</sup>

Eagleton ends by surmising that what is at work in Foucault's aesthetics of existence is a 'massive repression' by which he means that Foucault is merely substituting the body for the subject and the aesthetic for the ethical.<sup>490</sup> Therefore, the 'autonomous individual' is 'a matter, very scrupulously, of surface, art, technique, sensation.'<sup>491</sup> This is similar to Best and Kellner's complaint that, by individualising ethics, Foucault has reduced the individual from a 'multidimensional form of agency and praxis to a decentred desiring existence.'<sup>492</sup> Eagleton argues that this decentred, desiring self cannot be capable of autonomously acting on the basis of any rational principle the self gives itself as Foucault implies. Yet, this is not something that Foucault ever argued the self practices. Foucault never intended that the self should practice an ethics that is based on morality as command. Foucault's entire ethical project is based on the (Nietzschean) impossibility that some command morality could ever be established. Bennett rightly points out that for Foucault, 'ethics is a matter of *reflective heteronomy*, of the recognition of one's implication in and dependence upon a web of social relations within which there nevertheless remains room for the individual to carve out a space of distinction, self-direction, or 'liberty.'<sup>493</sup> I now turn to Wolin's critique of Foucault.

## **Aesthetics and the self-created narcissist**

Wolin, places his objections to Foucault's aestheticisation of ethics in a frame similar to Eagleton's. Wolin begins his critique within the context of the Habermasian division between science, morality and art.<sup>494</sup> According to Wolin, Foucault is a 'pan-aestheticist' in the sense that he transgresses the Habermasian boundaries of

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<sup>489</sup> Connolly, 'Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault,' 110.

<sup>490</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 395.

<sup>491</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 395.

<sup>492</sup> Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (New York, NY: Guilford, 1991), 290-292.

<sup>493</sup> Bennett, 'How is It, Then, That We Still Remain Barbarians?,' 662.

<sup>494</sup> Richard Wolin, 'Foucault's aesthetic decisionism,' *Telos*, (1987): 73.

experience by refusing to ‘rest content with aestheticism qua transcendent, supramundane spiritual activity.’<sup>495</sup> Instead, he views Foucault as concerned only with generalising beauty and the artistic sphere throughout the whole of life. Wolin maintains that by following Nietzsche, Foucault’s aim is to cultivate ‘the aesthetic attitude toward the world’ and this ‘must transgress the boundaries of the aesthetic sphere per se, and pursue a course of conscious world-mastery.’<sup>496</sup> Just as Nietzsche did, Foucault defies the separation of the ‘inner’ logics in differentiated realms of human cognition.<sup>497</sup>

Wolin acknowledges that aestheticism may hold an important critical and utopian function. Aestheticism can be creative and is what allows for the imagining of alternative futures, which ‘by virtue of their anticipatory, utopian qualities, their sheer ‘being other,’ are able to present a powerful indictment of the existing world in its present indigent state.’<sup>498</sup> However, in order to ensure that its insights are not merely abstract, according to Wolin, the aesthetic realm must mutually pervade the ethical and the cognitive realms. Foucault though prioritises aesthetics above all else.

According to Wolin: ‘[t]he proponents of aestheticism emend decisionism by emphasising style or art – the final determinant of conduct.’<sup>499</sup> He views the major difference between decisionism and aesthetics being the aestheticist option of ‘an a-social, narcissistic withdrawal-into-self’ which is ‘a posture, strictly speaking incompatible with decisionism.’<sup>500</sup> Followed to its logical conclusion, Wolin argues that the aesthetic position opens the door to forms of life that are ‘manipulative and predatory vis-à-vis others.’<sup>501</sup> He therefore concludes, as Eagleton did, that there is no ‘discernible trace of human solidarity, mutuality or fellow-feeling’<sup>502</sup> to be found in Foucault’s self.

<sup>495</sup> Wolin, ‘Foucault’s aesthetic decisionism,’ 73.

<sup>496</sup> Wolin, ‘Foucault’s aesthetic decisionism,’ 73.

<sup>497</sup> Wolin, ‘Foucault’s aesthetic decisionism,’ 73.

<sup>498</sup> Wolin, ‘Foucault’s aesthetic decisionism,’ 85.

<sup>499</sup> Wolin, ‘Foucault’s aesthetic decisionism,’ 84.

<sup>500</sup> Wolin, ‘Foucault’s aesthetic decisionism,’ 84.

<sup>501</sup> Wolin, ‘Foucault’s aesthetic decisionism,’ 84.

<sup>502</sup> Wolin, ‘Foucault’s aesthetic decisionism,’ 85.

In Wolin's analysis, Foucault prefers the beautiful and the tasteful to the more serious matters of collective action and social justice. Good taste cannot distinguish, except arbitrarily, between what is just and unjust. Wolin sees in Foucault's self a dandy making trivial choices between fancies, firm in his conviction that 'the Enlightenment project of rational reflection....is not worth saving.'<sup>503</sup> Although Wolin does acquiesce that there are criteria of value internal to the aesthetic sphere, they are a matter of dramatic effect rather than content. Centring aesthetics leaves one with little more than 'a dramaturgical model of conduct, in which action becomes meaningful solely qua performative gesture.'<sup>504</sup>

The essence of Wolin's critique is that Foucault positions the aesthetic as the most important determinant of life. By singling out the aesthetic attitude to living, Foucault is insensitive to any other possible values. This results in an insensitivity to taking other individuals, or a community, as ends in themselves (rather than means). Therefore, other persons can only ever serve as aids to an individual's *own* project of aesthetic self-formation. Wolin argues that others are no more than 'material for my own personal aesthetic gratification; they are degraded to the status of bit players in the drama of my own private aesthetic spectacle.'<sup>505</sup> Wolin does not stop here though, but goes on to argue that once the *telos* of Foucault's ethics has been established as oriented to 'this-worldly ends,' which is a matter of 'self-control for theatrical effect,' an 'aesthetics of existence' is an ethics that:

...favours either an attitude of narcissistic self-absorption or one of outwardly directed, aggressive self-aggrandizement. In neither case is there a discernible trace of human solidarity, mutuality or fellow-feeling. Instead the ethical universe of aesthetic decisionism is a Hobbesian state of nature....with a flair for style.<sup>506</sup>

Like Eagleton though, I maintain that Wolin has based his critique of Foucault on only a selective reading. He has taken Foucault's aesthetics out of context for the purpose of singling out this particular aspect. He fails to take into consideration that

<sup>503</sup> Wolin, 'Foucault's aesthetic decisionism,' 78.

<sup>504</sup> Richard Wolin, *The Terms of Cultural Criticism: The Frankfurt School, Existentialism, Poststructuralism* (New York, Chichester: Columbia University Press, 1992), 192.

<sup>505</sup> Wolin, 'Foucault's aesthetic decisionism,' 192.

<sup>506</sup> Wolin, 'Foucault's aesthetic decisionism,' 85.

Foucault does affirm the necessity of a code. Recall from Chapter Three that one of the main aspects of Foucault's ethics is the 'mode of subjectivation' (*mode d'assujettissement*). Subjectivation is the way in which the individual establishes her/his relation to the moral code, which is different from subjection, whereby the individual is proclaimed a subject in a given discourse. The former requires the active participation of the individual whereas the latter does not. The mode of subjectivation is transformative in the sense that it is not passive, but rather demands the active participation of the subject. Foucault's aim is to shift the emphasis to the manner in which the individual is meant to constitute herself as a moral subject of her own actions, but not through a denial of the moral code. Foucault is explicit in this when he states that '[c]odes of behaviour and forms of subjectivation...can never be entirely dissociated.'<sup>507</sup> Ethics is made up of both together.

Wolin's critique therefore, suffers from a lack of consideration of the central place that *ascesis* occupies in Foucault's aesthetic ethics. Recall from the first section of this chapter that Foucault elaborates self-care as governed by *ascesis* – self-discipline and self-restraint - much more so than by style understood as performance. Style is only something that is cultivated through *ascesis*. Bennett importantly points out that Foucault is following Nietzsche in his conception of the laborious task of stylisation:

One thing is needful – To 'give style' to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weaknesses delight the eye. Here a large mass of second nature has been added; there a piece of original nature has been removed – both times through long practice and daily work at it. Here the ugly that could not be removed is concealed; there it has been reinterpreted and made sublime. Much that is vague and resisted shaping has been saved and exploited for distant views; it is meant to beckon toward the far and immeasurable.<sup>508</sup>

Instead of acknowledging that Foucault's ethics is one that is only born through 'long practice and daily work,' Wolin criticises Foucault for being preoccupied with

<sup>507</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 29.

<sup>508</sup> Nietzsche quoted in Bennett, 'How is It, Then, That We Still Remain Barbarians?', 663.



*how* it is that we do things rather than what we do. Eagleton similarly expresses this concern when he asks if rape, for the Foucaultian self, is morally deplorable only because it indicates ‘a certain imprudence or immoderacy on the part of the rapist?’<sup>509</sup> Dews comes to a similar conclusion when he states that ‘Foucault wishes to avoid judging power-knowledge complexes from a normative standpoint.’<sup>510</sup> And again, Best and Kellner chime in to object to Foucault’s lack of attention to structures of domination when they claim that the turn to aesthetics promotes a ‘micropolitics of desire’ rather than collective forms of resistance that are guided by an ethics of social justice.<sup>511</sup>

What all these critiques share in common is the accusation that Foucault is merely concentrating on *how* the subject does things rather than *what* is being done. Their criticisms are expressive of a discomfort with Foucault’s refusal to place a (‘the’) moral code at the heart of his ethical project. Foucault, instead focusses on: ‘the manner in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code’<sup>512</sup> as well as on those processes by which the individual becomes a moral subject of her own actions. Thus, what critics like Wolin and Eagleton overlook is the emphasis that Foucault’s ethics puts on subjectivation and that he, in no way, is denying that moral codes are either valid or necessary. To the contrary, he argues that:

.....the assumption of all this morality was that the one who cared for himself correctly found himself, by that very fact, in a measure to behave correctly in relationships to others and for others.....it is the power over self which will regulate the power over others.<sup>513</sup>

In a manner that is similar to ‘code morality,’ subjectivation concerns governing one’s behaviour. The two (ethics and morality) differ though in the way that the process of subjectivation responds to subtle norms of behaviour and thought and in

<sup>509</sup> Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, 394.

<sup>510</sup> Peter Dews, ‘The Return of the Subject in Late Foucault,’ *Radical Philosophy*, Volume 51 (Spring 1989), 37.

<sup>511</sup> Best and Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations*, 290.

<sup>512</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: 2, The Use of Pleasure*, 26.

<sup>513</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘The ethic of care for self as a practice of freedom, an interview with Michel Foucault,’ interview by Raul Fornet-Betancourt et al, *Final Foucault*, James Bernauer and David Rasmussen (eds) (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 7-8.

so doing, raises the issue as to which sensibilities, attitudes and character are most appropriate. In short, ethics asks what sort of person I should be. Morality on the other hand, takes as its concern which actions are most praiseworthy. Because codes and moral laws are only crude frameworks, behaviour that is enacted within a specific social context and its possible consequent potential to be injurious, falls outside of their scope. Bennett on this count argues that by placing emphasis on the techniques of subjectivation, Foucault allows for a ‘more careful and resilient approach to ethics.’<sup>514</sup>

This ‘careful and resilient approach to ethics’ to summarise, is one that is the interconnection between the moral code and subjectivation. The latter element is a complex, labourious *praxis*. As such it is composed of multiple tasks. Firstly, it works to specify which part of the self is to be worked on for ethics. Secondly, a determination is to be made as to which exercises and tests are to install the ethical code upon the self as sensibility. Thirdly, a rationale for adherence to ethical disciplines and principles must be generated. Lastly, a *telos* must be designated for the ethical subject.<sup>515</sup> That is, a response is articulated to the question of what sort of person I should aspire to when I behave in a moral way.

Foucault leaves this latter matter of a *telos* unsubstantiated. At this point I would like to tease out two issues here which I treat separately, but that are interrelated. Firstly, I will pursue the matter of Foucault’s ‘unsubstantiated’ *telos*, a point that many of his critics, and some supporters, remain dissatisfied with all of whom take the view that this is an insurmountable problem. Ultimately, I will argue that this is a strength in his approach and one I will seek to retain. Yet, it does raise the question as to whether or not, this ‘aesthetics of existence’ is now open to falling prey to the same dangers a code morality. Now that the individual is ‘free’ to choose, what is it that she will want? This is a question of motivation for the choosing, the wanting, comes from some place. This brings me to the second issue - what if an individual’s ‘desire’ emanates from a place of self-deception? What if she ‘desires’ from a place of injury,

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<sup>514</sup> Bennett, ‘How is it then that we still remain Barbarians?’, 666.

<sup>515</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An overview of work in progress,’ *Foucault Reader*, 355.

from *ressentiment*? This is something that Foucault does not offer consideration of yet is something that is necessary to deal with in the context of the present project. In the next section, I turn to the first matter of whether or not an unsubstantiated *telos* is undesirable.

## **An unsubstantiated *telos***

As discussed above, a common complaint about Foucault is that he lacks a normative standpoint and therefore, ends up offering nothing more than moral nihilism. As I also pointed out, Bennett suggests in rebuttal, that this sort of critique misses the point that by refusing to position a command morality at the centre of his ethics, Foucault does not reject out of hand the need for rules, prohibitions, etc.<sup>516</sup>

Foucault did recognise that ethics refers to elements of the code and draws attention to his insistence that:

I had to keep in mind the distinction between the code elements of a morality and the elements of asceticism, neglecting neither their coexistence, their interrelations, their relative autonomy, nor their possible differences of emphasis....I am not supposing that the codes are unimportant.<sup>517</sup>

Foucault's point is that although ethics might take its bearing from prescribed codes of conduct, ethical conduct cannot be simply a matter of being read off of a moral code. What is actually most crucial is 'the *manner* in which one ought to form oneself as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code' (my emphasis).<sup>518</sup> In other words, a moral code is insufficient to capture the whole of the work that the individual needs to undertake. As regards the law and customs ('the *nomoi*'), Foucault argues that although respecting these was emphasised for the Greco-Romans, what was more important was 'the *attitude* that caused one to respect them' (my emphasis).<sup>519</sup> Once again, Foucault is emphasising the formation of *sensibilities* as the most important dynamic of ethical practice:

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<sup>516</sup> Connolly defends Foucault on similar grounds in his article: 'Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault,' *Political Theory*, Volume 21, Number 3 (August, 1993): 365-389.

<sup>517</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 31-32.

<sup>518</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 26.

<sup>519</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 31.

‘there is no...forming of the ethical subject without ‘modes of subjection’ and an ‘ascetics’ or ‘practices of the self’ that support them.’<sup>520</sup>

While Bennett defends Foucault on this point, she nonetheless goes on to ask whether or not it would have been better if Foucault had filled out his concept of ethics with some specific content and surmises that indeed it would have been.<sup>521</sup> I disagree with Bennett on pursuing this line of specification. I do not agree that it is productive, nor is it in keeping with Foucault’s conception of ethics, to pursue the specification of content that leads us back to ‘universalizing ideals that are class or race or gender specific.’<sup>522</sup> I think that the more productive specificity lies in the area of elaborating *how* this ethical sensibility is to be cultivated. That is, what is it that will make the sensibility ethical? How do we go about cultivating ethical sensibilities? What theoretical and philosophical resources are available to us to go about working out such a project?

Connolly suggests that Foucault creates a reflexive ‘little space between morality and ethics.’<sup>523</sup> Again, Foucault does not tell us how this ‘little space’ should be filled out and this is the nub of dissatisfaction for his many critics, whom are not satisfied with his lack of specification of the normative content of his ethics. McNay suggests that it is in Foucault’s essay ‘What is Enlightenment?’ that he gives consideration to the normative substance of his ethics.<sup>524</sup> In this essay, Foucault considers Kant’s formulation of the Enlightenment as an attitude of critical self-awareness. Foucault gives special consideration to a definition of the Enlightenment through the term *Aufgang*, or exit, which he views as presenting the birth of the modern subject.

According to Kant, the *Aufgang* that characterises the Enlightenment is a process that frees the individual from a state of immaturity. Kant argues that individuals are

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<sup>520</sup> Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, 2: The Use of Pleasure*, 28.

<sup>521</sup> Bennett, ‘How is It, Then, That We Still Remain Barbarians?’: Foucault, Schiller, and the Aestheticization of Ethics,’ 666.

<sup>522</sup> Bennett, ‘How is It, Then, That We Still Remain Barbarians?’: Foucault, Schiller, and the Aestheticization of Ethics,’ 666.

<sup>523</sup> Connolly, ‘Beyond Good and Evil: The Ethical Sensibility of Michel Foucault,’ 369.

<sup>524</sup> McNay, *Foucault and feminism: power, gender and the self*.

kept in a state of immaturity as a result of their idleness and lack of courage:

Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man's inability to make use of his reason without direction from another. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* 'Have courage to use your own reason!' - that is the motto of enlightenment.<sup>525</sup>

Similarly to Kant, Foucault places the notion of critique at the centre of his ethics. Foucault also retains the notion of rational autonomy and this is central to his theory of aesthetics; it is what is central to an individual's ability to exercise critical judgment and create the space between himself and the imposition of dominant beliefs, norms and desires. Foucault further clarified this in a 1984 interview in which he made the essential link between freedom, ethics and critical reflection:

It is obvious that by liberating our desire we will learn to conduct ourselves ethically.....for what is ethics, if not the practice of freedom....Freedom is the ontological condition of ethics. But ethics is the considered form that freedom takes when it is informed by reflection.<sup>526</sup>

In his 'Power, Moral Values and the Intellectual' Foucault offers more detail, describing himself as a 'moralist' and listing the 'three elements in [his]....morals' as 'refusal, curiosity, innovation.'<sup>527</sup> We should refuse to submit to the 'government of individualization' through a ceaseless questioning of what appears natural and inevitable in our own identity: an interrogation of the 'contemporary limits of the necessary.'<sup>528</sup> Refusal is fortified by the attributes of curiosity and innovation: 'I dream of a new age of curiosity' he writes.<sup>529</sup> Curiosity functions as both a capacity

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<sup>525</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. by Mary J. Gregor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 7.

<sup>526</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Ethics of the Concern for Self as a Practice of Freedom,' P. Rabinow (ed) *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume 1*, 284.

<sup>527</sup> Michel Foucault, 'Power, Moral Values and the Intellectual,' *History of the Present 4* (Spring, 1988), 1.

<sup>528</sup> Michel Foucault, 'What is Enlightenment?', 46.

<sup>529</sup> Michel Foucault, 'The Masked Philosopher,' ed. Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth: Essential Works of Foucault 1954 – 1984, Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 1994), 325.

and a concern to seek out the strangeness in everything that is familiar, traditional, necessary and fundamental to life. Innovation works to complement curiosity and is the capacity to continually search out new ways of thinking about things and new ways of imagining. Together, innovation and curiosity lead the individual to never rest content with the knowledge that one has acquired. This is Nietzsche: ‘We have to learn to think differently – in order at last, perhaps very late on, to attain even more: to feel differently.’<sup>530</sup>

The three attitudes - refusal, curiosity, and innovation - are motivated by ‘the danger principle,’ which Foucault regards as informing our ethical choices:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous....If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do.....I think that the ethicopolitical choice we have to make every day is to determine which is the main danger.<sup>531</sup>

This language is reminiscent of Reagon’s account of coalitional politics in which she emphasises that collective political action is ‘the most dangerous work that you can do.’<sup>532</sup> Recall that Reagon describes the work that the individual undertakes in collective politics as ‘dangerous’ in a way that is life threatening, yet it is work that must be undertaken because it is the only choice that is possible if one wants to ‘survive.’<sup>533</sup> Foucault, on the other hand, is invoking ‘danger’ as something precariously positive and not necessarily ‘life threatening.’ So, although Foucault appears to recognise the suspicion that Reagon is expressing in her misgivings of the dangers inherent in coalitional politics, he links distrust with hope: ‘And if you are suspicious, it is because you have a certain *hope*....and we don’t have to renounce our hope because we are suspicious, or renounce suspicion because we have hope’ (my emphasis).<sup>534</sup> Thus, Foucault’s attitude of a sceptical criticism does not amount

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<sup>530</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 104).

<sup>531</sup> Michel Foucault, ‘On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress,’ Paul Rabinow (ed) *The Foucault Reader* (London: Penguin, 1984), 343.

<sup>532</sup> Reagon, ‘Coalition Politics: Turning the Century,’ 359.

<sup>533</sup> Reagon, recall, asserts that: ‘You don’t go into a coalition because you like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that is the only way you can figure out how to stay alive.’

<sup>534</sup> Foucault quoted in McLaren, *Feminism, Foucault, and embodied subjectivity*, 43.

to an inert pessimism, or fatalism, but rather to a hopefulness about the future.

In Foucault's aesthetic ethics, the creation of the self is always as an act of freedom and the language he uses to describe self-transformation is in terms of 'pleasures' and intentional 'choosing,' rather than 'desire' in the sense that Brown uses the term. Freedom is a practice in the sense of *praxis* and this needs to be retained. But I want now to return to Brown's complaint against Foucault that he has tacitly assumed the givenness and resilience of the 'desire' for freedom and that this arises through his implicit conflation of the will to power in the practice of resistance with a will to freedom. What is it that can motivate or thwart the 'desire' for freedom? In order to address this, I now turn to the second matter of concern to do with the presumption of the direction of *telos*.

I wish to recall what I raised in Part One. Namely, that part of the problematic of identity politics is that such projects are premised on the shared experience of the injustice of oppression. As such, identity politics originate from within a negative experience – that of the injustice of oppression. If injustice is a felt and personal experience then in order for any account of transformation at the level of the self to be useful, it must offer a consideration of the effects of the felt experience of the injustice of oppression. Brown's account of *ressentiment* warns of the dangers inherent in not attending to the dynamics at work in identity politics thereof. Recall from Chapter Three that, according to Brown, 'desire' appears to be constituted *through* wounding and therefore, I argued that there is no 'desire' available to be recovered prior to wounding. Rather, 'desire' will need to be rehabilitated from within the wounding. I suggested that 'desire' would need to be approached in a way that is reminiscent of Aristotle's *orexis* ('desire'), where 'desire' is conceived of as tied to the emotions and is a constituent cause of motion. Recall too that in Aristotle, *orexis* is guided by right reason and it is these together which motivate the agent to act. I now move in the following section to draw on some of Iris Murdoch's picture of the self in order to begin to develop an account of how the 'memory' of 'desire' can be rehabilitated from *within* identificatory processes and not prior to its wounding.

## The ethical self and *ressentiment*

Like Foucault, Murdoch does not support the metaphysical notion of a substantive self and in her exploration of the notion of subjectivity, she similarly turns to ancient Greece. She too, maintains that an aesthetic relation is of central ethical importance to any conception of the self. She shares also with Foucault a concern with the transformation of the self. Whereas in Foucault's aesthetic ethics, the creation of the self is always as an act of freedom and the language he uses employs the terms 'pleasures' and 'chooses' to describe self-creation and self-transformation, Murdoch however, focusses on our human frailties. She describes the frail and vulnerable individual as so:

artists are human individuals, no work is perfect, though our hearts may claim perfection for some. The material of art is contingent limited historically stained stuff. Nevertheless art is a great source of revelation. Bad art displays the base aspects of human nature more clearly than anything else, though of course not so harmfully. One might even say that the exemplification of human frailty in bad art is a clearer warning to us than its representation in good art.<sup>535</sup>

Similar to Foucault for whom the self was to be created, or transformed, for Murdoch the self, or as she writes, our fantasy of who we are, and of how we move about in the world, obstructs clear vision, and it is for this reason that the self is to be transformed. Murdoch maintains that transformation of the self is necessary, not for the reason that some pre-existing 'true' self could be uncovered, or discovered. Rather, transformation is necessary in order to free the individual of the tendency to self-centredness. It is only once transformed that the individual might live more freely. For Murdoch, an 'aesthetics of existence' is being able to truly *see* reality, in order to be able to live in it, in all our activities, and *with* others: '[the] same virtues, in the end the same virtue (love), are required throughout, and fantasy (self) can prevent us from seeing a blade of grass just as it can prevent us from seeing another person.'<sup>536</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a guide to morals* (London: Vintage, 1992), 85- 86.

<sup>536</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 68.



For Foucault, the defining aesthetic of an ethics of *praxis* is that it allows for an *other* life - different from the one to which we are subjected - and fortified by the attitudes of 'refusal, curiosity, innovation' that challenge the illusions built into social convention. Murdoch likewise holds that it is important to live consciously and this necessitates the cultivation of attention to the world in all its contingent dynamics, and to the self in that world, cultivating a relationship to the *good* and an attitude of *love*.

### **'Desire' as motivating energy**

I now move to show how Murdoch can helpfully be drawn on to address the problematic of the wounding scene of identity politics. Recall that politicised identity moves within the constraints of liberalism. Therefore, if the transformative elements of identity politics are to be developed, it is necessary to understand the constitution of 'desire.' Brown identifies the primary question of identity politics as being about a 'desire' that is born both in and through pain. Brown argues that Foucault's ethical project, because it posits 'freedom as a practice,' suffers from a neglect of the issue of the direction of 'desire.' How is it that the subject born in and through pain inevitably 'desires' freedom? Does this pain not carry the danger of thwarting the 'will to freedom'? And if it does, how do we go about ameliorating the desire that thwarts freedom? What sort of dispositions should be cultivated here in order to heal thwarted 'desire'?

Murdoch equates 'desire' with *eros*, which is to be understood as a kind of basic motivating energy that can either direct the life of an individual positively or negatively. Understanding 'desire' as a primary, base motivator, is not unlike some feminist understandings of the term. Tomm, in her 'Ethics and Self-knowing: The Satisfaction of Desire' writes similarly of 'desire' as 'the basic motivator or social action' and that 'individual agency is shaped by each person's desire(s).'<sup>537</sup> And furthermore, that 'desire is the instigator of all ethical conduct.'<sup>538</sup> Lourde similarly,

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<sup>537</sup> Winnie Tomm, 'Ethics and Self-knowing: The Satisfaction of Desire,' eds. Eve Browning Cole and Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Explorations in Feminist Ethics: Theory and Practice* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 101.

<sup>538</sup> Tomm, 'Ethics and Self-knowing: The Satisfaction of Desire,' 101.

in her essay ‘Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,’ refers to *eros* as deeply felt love, desire and passion, as the ‘yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings’ and the ‘capacity for joy.’<sup>539</sup> According to Lourdes’ account, *eros* is what gives our lives meaning and establishes an evaluative standard. *Eros* serves as a guide to choice-making; it is what yields knowledge of what gives our lives meaning and is empowering for how it *inspires* us.<sup>540</sup>

But what Tamm and Lourdes both overlook is the more problematic side of ‘desire.’ They view *eros* as *only* the well of potentially positive motivation for ethical conduct. They do not consider the possibility that ‘desire’ might be formed and malformed through a primary ‘injury.’ For them ‘desire’ is a resource that exists outside of a situated subjectivity. By positing ‘desire’ as a resource, they preclude an exploration of the transformation, or in Murdoch’s words, the ‘purification’ of ‘desire’ that may be necessary *before* ‘desire’ can be drawn on as a resource for positive ethical conduct.<sup>541</sup>

Murdoch views ‘desire’ as tied to Freud’s ‘fat relentless ego,’<sup>542</sup> and therefore, argues that far from being an unproblematic resource, it holds the potential to either ‘make or mar the life of the individual’:

Plato uses this concept of energy [Eros] to explain the nature of moral change. (As in Freud, ‘cure’ lies in redeployment of energy.) He essentially accompanies the image of energy (magnetic attraction) by that of light and vision. The sun gives warmth and vital forces, and also the light by which we can see. We must transform base egoistic energy and vision (low Eros) into high spiritual energy and vision (high Eros).<sup>543</sup>

Moral change, the transformation of the ‘low Eros’ into ‘high Eros,’ happens

<sup>539</sup> Audre Lourde, *Sister Outsider: essays and speeches* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), 56-57.

<sup>540</sup> For other feminists who make similar claims about the knowledge and power of *eros* see Carter Heyward, *Touching Our Strength: The Erotic as Power and the Love of God* (Harper and Row: San Francisco, 1989); Haunani-Kay Trask, *Eros and Power: The Promise of Feminist Theory* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988).

<sup>541</sup> See Cheryl Hall who argues that this is the fault committed by much of the feminist literature on *eros*: ‘Politics, Ethics and the ‘Uses of the Erotic,’ eds. Bat-Ami Bar On and Ann Ferguson, *Daring to be good: essays in feminist ethic-politics* (New York and London: Routledge, 1998), 3-14.

<sup>542</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 51.

<sup>543</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a guide to morals*, 25.

gradually and slowly. That is, a shift in focus is brought about slowly, away from the ego, which tends towards simplification, invention, and preconceived expectation and towards ‘high Eros,’ which seeks to understand. It is ‘low Eros’ I am suggesting that is Brown’s ‘who am I?,’ - that unproductive positioning of the self trapped in its quest to find the answer to ‘who am I?.’ ‘High Eros’, on the other hand, is the self involved with the world in a quest to answer ‘what do I want for us?’

In the latter positioning of the ego, Murdoch argues that it is ‘vision’ that assists in the transformation of ‘low Eros’ into ‘high Eros.’ Where Kant argues, and much modern moral and political theory follows, that it is the will that simply springs into action (‘the sudden call of duty’) when necessary, Murdoch, following Plato, uses a more realistic concept of ‘moral spiritual desire’ in which ‘a slow shift of attachments wherein looking (concentrating, attending, attentive discipline) is a source of divine (purified) energy.’<sup>544</sup> ‘Desire’ is to be understood in Murdoch in the terms of motivation. But, having brought in the problem of egoism, rather than identifying the problem of the ego with the will, Murdoch instead locates it in ‘the image-making’ consciousness.<sup>545</sup> Thus, the most basic moral problem becomes one of the development of clear vision and clear vision necessitates recognising and dealing with *ressentiment* since it acts as an obstruction to clear vision.

### **Purified ‘Desire’: Vision**

‘Vision,’ according to Murdoch, is a form of knowledge (or ‘belief’), and contains within it the ‘desire’ that motivates the will in moral action, rather than the other way around, which is how feminists like Lourdes and Tomm appear to understand it. In Murdoch, the will does not, as in Kant, ‘spring’ into action, but rather is always conditioned by the limits of ‘vision’ or knowledge. Therefore, rather than being detached, the will is embedded in a complex consciousness and is always a direct function of ‘moral vision.’ Murdoch puts it this way: ‘I can only choose within a world that I can see.’<sup>546</sup>

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<sup>544</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a guide to morals*, 24-5.

<sup>545</sup> Maria Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000), 131.

<sup>546</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 36.

‘Vision’ is the complex apprehension of ourselves in and of the world and is irreducible to a mere surveying of the facts. In a manner similar to Foucault, Murdoch posits an individual’s choices as a function of, not only the will, but also knowledge and vision. Unlike Foucault though, Murdoch argues that both knowledge and vision include the *quality* of perception *and* states of mind, which begs the further, or primary, question of what the quality of our motivation is.

In Murdoch, moral language does not amount to a practical indication of an individual’s choice, but has the function of an instrument of an individual’s unique perception of the world. This idea Murdoch develops in the well-known example of the mother ‘M’ and her daughter-in-law, ‘D.’ In the story of ‘M’ and ‘D,’ Murdoch provides an example of concrete moral deliberation that serves to critique behaviourism. In the example she describes a situation in which an individual’s feelings remain inward, privately hidden from any observer. I quote at length here:

A mother, whom I shall call M feels hostility to her daughter-in-law, whom I shall call D. M finds D quite a good-hearted girl, but while not exactly common, yet certainly unpolished and lacking in dignity and refinement. D is inclined to be pert and familiar, insufficiently ceremonious, brusque, sometimes positively rude, always tiresomely juvenile. M does not like D’s accent or the way D dresses. M feels that her son has married beneath him. Let us assume for purposes of the example that the mother, who is a very ‘correct’ person, behaves beautifully to the girl throughout, not allowing her real opinion to appear in any way. We might underline this aspect of the example by supposing that the young couple have emigrated or that D is now dead: the point being to ensure that whatever is in question as *happening* happens entirely in M’s mind.<sup>547</sup>

This passage shows Murdoch introducing her notion of vision. What is described is something going on ‘entirely in M’s mind,’ and in the following passage Murdoch demonstrates how the mental image M holds of D has nothing to do with M’s actions towards D:

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<sup>547</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 16.

Time passes and it could be that M settles down with a hardened sense of grievance and a fixed picture of D, imprisoned (if I may use a question-begging word) by the cliché: my poor son has married a silly vulgar girl. However, the M of the example is an intelligent and well-intentioned person, capable of self-criticism, capable of giving careful and just attention to an object which confronts her. M tells herself: 'I am old-fashioned and conventional. I may be prejudiced and narrow-minded. I may be snobbish. I am certainly jealous. Let me look again.'<sup>548</sup>

The individual is associated with the language of vision:

....is not the metaphor of vision almost irresistibly suggested to anyone who, without philosophical prejudice, wishes to describe the situation? Is it not the natural metaphor? M looks at D, she attends to D, she focuses her attention. M is engaged in an internal struggle. She may for instance be tempted to enjoy caricatures of D in her imagination.'<sup>549</sup>

In Murdoch's example, M's morality exists 'not simply in her moving will but in her seeing and knowing mind.'<sup>550</sup> Moral activity is not only outward action, but actually precedes the outward action, having taken place in the mind and in fact, is continuous, never actually finalised. It is this contrast between the activity of moral vision and the activity of the will that is crucial in Murdoch. Murdoch decentres the emphasis on choice to the 'complex of intellect, vision and imagination,'<sup>551</sup> which is the background of the choices made by the moral agent.

Murdoch argues that it will then require an 'elaborate normative vocabulary' that is sufficient to developing a moral vision; choice-guiding words will not suffice.<sup>552</sup> In Murdoch's example, it is moral language that becomes an instrument of knowledge – of the agent and her world – and this moral vocabulary is not determined by a public context on which all individuals can agree. Rather it is something that develops privately.

How does Murdoch's agent hold a right and truthful vision in which 'desire' has

<sup>548</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

<sup>549</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 20.

<sup>550</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 28.

<sup>551</sup> Antonaccio, *Picturing the Human: The Moral Thought of Iris Murdoch*, 89.

<sup>552</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 8.

been purified of ego (and the dangerous trap of ‘suffering’)? According to Murdoch’s account the agent’s attention must be focussed on the good. Murdoch writes that ‘I would suggest that the authority of the Good seems to us something necessary because the realism (ability to perceive the world and one’s place in it) required for goodness is a kind of intellectual ability to perceive what is true, which is automatically at the same time a suppression of the self.’<sup>553</sup> By centring the notion of ‘attention’ Murdoch construes the ‘good’ as ‘needful’ in the sense that the agent’s inner work is undertaken for the world outside of which the self is a part of. Nonetheless, through the work of ‘unselfing,’ the individual remains paramount.<sup>554</sup>

Just as for Foucault the self is to be created, for Murdoch the self-centred self and how we function in and on the world, is the obstacle to clear vision, and must be ‘purified.’ The purification of ‘desire’ is a labour-intensive project, which is undertaken, not for the reason Foucault feared of ethical theories – for the purpose of some pre-existing ‘true’ self that would be recovered or discovered – but for the reason that, freed of the unhelpful baggage of self-centredness, one would now be able to live more freely, more able to see and connect with reality. That is, it is only possible to live a better life, *without* the identity-obsession of defining who one is. For Murdoch, the ‘aesthetics of existence’ means being able to truly *see* reality, in order to be able to live in it, in all our activities, and with others.

To conclude, for Murdoch the ‘good’ serves to unify experience. The self does not move about in a world of ‘facts’ free to choose how to evaluate these. Rather, Murdoch points to the evaluative aspect that is inherent in all thinking. Valuing, as her ‘M’ and ‘D’ example illustrates, is not merely one possible kind of cognitive activity among many that the agent freely chooses from. Rather, valuing is what belies *all* cognitive activities. The agent does not choose what to value and when to value it, for she is always already valuing. Therefore, the question for the agent is – how can I make myself better? Murdoch poses this question not only as a matter of how can I treat *you* better, but also in the sense of Foucault’s ‘needful bodies.’ That

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<sup>553</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 64.

<sup>554</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 91.

is, how can I *heal* myself? Murdoch's answer is by focussing on the 'good':

Good is unique, it is 'above being,' it fosters our sense of reality as the sun fosters life on earth. The virtues, the other moral forms, are aspects of this central idea, increasingly understood as interconnected parts of it.<sup>555</sup>

The 'good' is not a thing, moving out there in the world. It is not a resource and therefore, there is no clear way of exactly encountering it. It is for this reason that Murdoch argues that our vision is what we must improve. Cultivating our vision so that we can see others is the most important task and requires an inward turn.

## Conclusion

This chapter explored in detail Foucault's study of the Greek and Greco-Roman practices of the self as elaborated in his third volume of *The History of Sexuality*, paying careful attention to the elaboration of ethics as a *praxis* of 'care of the self.' I looked at the problematic of alterity in Foucault's ethics through a critique of the most common criticisms of Foucault's later work on ethics which accuse him of radical individualism. I argued that a careful reading of the *Histories of Sexuality* reveals that Foucault's account of the 'care of the self' is in fact dependent on friendship and in such a way that a non-reductive relation to others is what is cultivated and maintained. The turn inwards is not a negation or a repudiation of others, but is dependent upon them. Furthermore, it is here in the project of care of the self that the issue of 'perspectival knowledge' is addressed.

Whereas I argued that critiques of Foucault's ethics as 'care of the self' that view it as radically individualistic are misplaced, the next section revisits Brown's critique of *ressentiment* to argue that although Foucault does not neglect this problem, it could be more detailed. Therefore, I drew on some of Murdoch's work to show how we might develop the necessary rehabilitative work in a way that approaches it from within the wounding. Murdoch's picture of the inner life of the self is motivated by

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<sup>555</sup> Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals*, 399.

‘desire’ and it is through developing clear ‘vision’ that ‘desire’ is purified.

Both Foucault and Murdoch have been shown to counter those approaches to ethics which are most familiar. Rather than ethics as a matter of following a moral principle, their work guides us through the complexities of alterity and identity. Foucault delineates the hard work that is to be undertaken in the face of alterity. Murdoch does not turn away from how the fragility of the self may obstruct the clarity of vision that is necessary to see the other clearly. Murdoch insists that what is required is an ‘elaborate normative vocabulary’ sufficient to the task of developing a ‘moral vision;’ choice-guiding words are not sufficient for the complex task. Her suggestion is that virtue ethics provides the ‘vocabulary’ that we are looking for. Foucault does not shy away from virtue ethics. Indeed for him, recall that virtue is counter to those moral systems of regulation and order. He seems to posit virtue itself as located in the resisting of the established order of things. He writes that ‘there is something in critique that is akin to virtue’ and a ‘critical attitude [is] virtue in general.’ This sounds very much like Butler, who, recall from Chapter Three, situates herself in the same ethical tradition and indeed suggests that Foucault’s project of ‘self-transformation understood as a ‘practice of liberty,’ is to be understood as part of Foucault’s lexicon of virtue.’<sup>556</sup> In Section Three I follow these converging threads and undertake the task of developing virtue ethics as an ‘elaborate normative vocabulary’ to see how it is able to guide us through the complexities of identity and the issue of alterity.

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<sup>556</sup> Judith Butler, ‘What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,’ ed. David Ingram, *The Political* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 212.



## Part Three: Virtue ethics and the self

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## **Virtue ethics and feminism: Okin, Tessman and Nussbaum**

### **Introduction**

The main aim of the chapters of Part Three is to show how virtue ethics offers an elaborate normative vocabulary that allows for an original and productive way to think about the issues raised in feminist identity politics. Virtue ethics, is a type of ethics that works against the unrealistic and often unproductive search for universal rules. By undertaking the more challenging and dynamic task of asking how ‘I can be better,’ virtue ethics holds the aim of developing a contextualised understanding of the self in relation to the good. This is a dynamic task that entails the development of practical judgment in order to formulate answers to the issues of what it means to live well as an individual or a group in a specific time or place.

Despite the fact that many feminists share with virtue ethics the same dissatisfaction with the abstract, rule-bound, ambitious projects of deontological and consequentialist based ethical theory, there has been little interest in virtue ethics from feminists. Therefore, in this chapter I address some of the key concerns that feminists have expressed about an engagement with virtue ethics and I also look at feminist versions of virtue ethics. In particular, I look at Susan Moller Okin’s influential critique of Aristotle’s virtue ethics and Alasdair MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics. I then look at two possible directions for feminism to take virtue ethics forward through the recent work of both Lisa Tessman and Martha Nussbaum.

The chapter is organised as follows: the first section begins by addressing some of the key concerns that feminists have expressed about an engagement with virtue ethics. Okin’s critique is illustrative of some of the main objections that feminists

have raised about the possibility of a feminist engagement with virtue ethics. By offering a close reading of Okin's main concerns, I seek to assess and address these. The following section then looks at one possible direction for feminism to take virtue ethics forward offered by the recent work of the moral philosopher, Tessman. The final section moves to look at Nussbaum's well-known capabilities approach, which is a version of virtue ethics applied to political theory. Although both Tessman's and Nussbaum's approaches are compelling and have a number of strengths, I ultimately reject them as unsuitable for the purposes of a project that is concerned with the issue of forging and sustaining collective political projects across difference.

## **A feminist critique of Aristotelian virtue ethics: Susan Moller Okin**

Feminists, like Okin, express extreme scepticism over the potential of virtue ethics to address key feminist concerns to do with 'equal concern and respect for all human beings.'<sup>557</sup> By way of a brief summary of the main points of Okin's argument in 'Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues': Okin sizes up virtue ethics from a 'feminist point of view,' by which she means, from the 'perspective that expects women and men to be treated as equally human and due equal concern and respect.'<sup>558</sup> She focusses her critique on one of the earliest accounts of virtue ethics (i.e. Aristotle's) and one of the most recent (i.e. MacIntyre's).<sup>559</sup> She firstly, looks at whether Aristotle and MacIntyre's accounts of virtue ethics fail, or succeed, in meeting the feminist concern with 'equal concern and respect.' Finding that they both fail here, she sets about on an exploration to find out where they have gone wrong. Given their acceptance of the belief that women are not capable of achieving human 'virtue,' Okin locates their failure primarily in their accounts of early moral education. In the end, she turns to look at some feminist claims that there is in virtue

<sup>557</sup> Susan Moller Okin, 'Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,' ed. Roger Crisp, *How Should One Live? Essays on the Virtues*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 211. For a similar critique to that of Okin's, see John Exdell, 'Ethics, Ideology, and Feminine Virtue,' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy, Supplementary*, Volume 13 (1987), 169-99.

<sup>558</sup> Okin, 'Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,' 211.

<sup>559</sup> Okin assesses MacIntyre on the basis of his two books *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); and *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (Duckworth: London, 2004[1981]).

ethics something especially feminine and perhaps even feminist. I now turn to address her argument in detail.

### **Okin's critique of Aristotle's virtue ethics**

In Aristotle, what Okin finds particularly problematic is that his account of the virtues is one that is specifically given for the free and educated males of Athenian society. From here, she argues that Aristotle's political and ethical arguments *depend upon* the exclusion of women, slaves and manual labourers. Aristotle treats both women and slaves instrumentally in order to liberate men of the day to day running of the household, which serves to allow men to practice those virtues that lead to *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing.

Okin supports this claim by pointing out that in Aristotle's *Politics*, his two versions of *Ethics*, and the *Rhetoric*, when taken in light of his *Generation of Animals*, it is obvious that Aristotle 'clearly assumes women's inferiority' and that he views women as a 'deformity of nature.'<sup>560</sup> Noting that other feminists, sharing the same concern (of the equality and flourishing of women) conclude that it is possible to make use of Aristotle by dismissing or ignoring his 'misogynist and silly' account of women's biology, Okin remains unconvinced.<sup>561</sup> She insists that in order to determine whether Aristotle's work has the potential to be non-sexist, his account of the virtues must be closely examined.

Although Okin correctly accuses Aristotle of treating women and slaves instrumentally, it seems to me that the more worrying question is whether or not in an Aristotelian-derived virtue ethics some people (like women) *must* be treated instrumentally in order for others to achieve/live a flourishing life. If the answer to this question is yes, then any form of virtue ethics cannot be of any further use to feminism or any other emancipatory political project. I will argue that the answer is not affirmative, but that Okin, in exploring her own answer to this question, makes this possible and viable. Okin's main concerns lie not with virtue ethics per se, but

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<sup>560</sup> Okin, 'Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,' 213.

<sup>561</sup> Okin has in mind primarily L. Hirschman and Martha Nussbaum.

with a completely unrevised Aristotelian virtue ethics. That is, if virtue ethics is taken to be simply a list of virtues that is unchangeable. In Chapter Seven I will put forward the argument for a pluralistic conception of virtue ethics more fully, but for now, I simply would like to suggest that it is not necessary to take virtue ethics as a wholesale acceptance of the original list of virtues as presented by Aristotle. In fact, Okin's own accusations, of Aristotle's instrumental treatment of women and slaves, makes this impossible.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* opens with defining the notion of virtue to be presented as 'human virtue' by which is meant 'not that of the body but that of the soul.'<sup>562</sup> The 'vegetative' element of the soul is that which 'causes nutrition and growth' since it exists in 'all nurslings and embryos',<sup>563</sup> as well as appearing to function most in sleep; he concludes that it has no place in human excellence. Okin surmises that this leaves one with a picture of human 'beings whose nutrition and growth is affected through the power of the most passive and least human part of their souls.'<sup>564</sup> The individual seems to pass from embryo into adulthood alone, with no help from anyone else. Okin rightly points out that survival and well-being, from embryo to adulthood, is only possible with the care of women and/or slaves. She therefore concludes that there is a contradiction at work in Aristotle's logic. Yet, I do not think at this point Aristotle is in any way contradicting himself or his definition of what qualifies as a 'human virtue.' What he is doing is making a distinction of what it is that distinguishes humans from animals. Animals would also not survive from embryo to adulthood without being looked after. It may offend our feminist and more modern sensibilities to see this, but it seems to me that the more important point that Okin could have made here would have been in relation to the 'looking after' of the human prior to adulthood and whether or not *that* task, which Aristotle categorises as a 'function' is not actually more akin to a skill. The problem is in not recognising the presence of virtue in the looking after.

Having factored out all to do with the 'nutritive' and 'growth,' Aristotle then goes on

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<sup>562</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102<sup>a</sup>

<sup>563</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1102<sup>a</sup>40.

<sup>564</sup> Okin, 'Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,' 214.

to discuss human virtue. This he divides into moral and intellectual virtue: ‘intellectual virtue in the main owes both its birth and its growth to teaching (for which reason it requires experience and time), while moral virtue comes about as a result of habit.’<sup>565</sup> The moral virtues do not arise by nature, but rather they are something habituated and made perfect through habit. They are learned by doing them. Moral virtues are neither passions nor faculties, but rather ‘states of character.’ Specific virtues are then listed and discussed by Aristotle at length. They include: courage, temperance, liberality, magnificence, pride, good temper, friendliness, truthfulness, wit and justice. Here we can see that Okin is not wrong in pointing out that, even without reading the *Politics* and *Biology*, Aristotle’s list of virtues in *NE* are meant to apply to free male heads of household. I certainly do not disagree with Okin on these points. She is correct that Aristotle’s list of the virtues is androcentric and that a wholesale acceptance of Aristotle’s virtue ethics unrevised, virtue by virtue, is not conducive to the aims of feminism. This, she convincingly illustrates in her critique of MacIntyre’s appropriation of Aristotle, which I now turn to look at in order to clarify what it is about Aristotelian virtue ethics I do not take on board in the version of virtue ethics I will later work with.

### **Okin’s critique of MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics**

Okin’s main concern with MacIntyre’s appeal to Aristotelian theory of the virtues is his failure to address adequately the social hierarchy and domination inherent in the Aristotelian tradition. In particular, she takes issue with MacIntyre’s lack of accommodation for the changed and changing status of women. She finds objectionable the ‘pervasive elitism of MacIntyre’s defence of the traditions, and its equally pervasive sexism.’<sup>566</sup> Before I look at Okin’s critique of MacIntyre, I offer a summary of some of the salient points of *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*.<sup>567</sup>

MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* is a critique of ethical life in contemporary liberal capitalist societies. According to MacIntyre, modern moral philosophy lacks credibility because it has jettisoned the ideas of a human *telos* or purpose and, founded upon

<sup>565</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103<sup>a</sup>11-19.

<sup>566</sup> Okin, ‘Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,’ 217.

<sup>567</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*.

this, justice as a shared conception of social order. This has resulted in philosophers floundering in their attempts to come up with procedures with which to adjudicate between the competing claims of individuals who hold interests and values assumed to be unrelated to those of others. Adding to this lack of foundations, modern philosophers make claims to (varied, often incommensurable) universal values whilst neglecting context. The past is plundered in order to strengthen universalist claims, yet no homage is paid to the social and political context within which those theorists drawn on were acting:

We all too often still treat the moral philosophers of the past as contributors to a single debate with a relatively unvarying subject-matter, treating Plato and Hume and Mill as contemporaries both of ourselves and of each other. This leads to an abstraction of these writers from the cultural and social milieus in which they lived and thought and so history of their thought acquires a false independence from the rest of the culture. Kant ceases to be part of the history of Prussia, Hume is no longer a Scotsman.<sup>568</sup>

Devoid of a notion of *telos*, or attention to context, ethics is simply empty, and moral claims become incoherent. In order to correct this, MacIntyre surveys those conceptions of virtue at work through Western moral philosophy. This is a project he undertakes in an effort to demonstrate how it is not possible to make sense of them until sense can be made of the ‘practices,’ contextualised in the particular place and time from which they originate.

Turning to Aristotle, MacIntyre rejects his metaphysical biology, acknowledging that Aristotle’s social theory is ‘deformed by his beliefs about women and about the nature of slaves.’<sup>569</sup> He replaces Aristotle’s metaphysical biology,<sup>570</sup> which holds that the human *telos* originates out of the human faculty to reason, with an emphasis on traditions and their practices.<sup>571</sup> MacIntyre defines a practice as ‘any coherent and

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<sup>568</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 11.

<sup>569</sup> MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, 121.

<sup>570</sup> This is the view that man has an essential nature or soul which defines his purposes.

<sup>571</sup> Although, in his more recent work, MacIntyre has revised this earlier view and now sees it as impossible to separate ethics from biology: ‘I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible.’ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: why human beings need the virtues* (London: Duckworth, 1999), x.

complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.<sup>572</sup> Practices are activities whose ends are internal to them. Human virtues, according to MacIntyre, are those ‘acquired’ qualities that are necessary in order for us to achieve ‘the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices and the lack of which effectively prevents us from achieving any such goods.’<sup>573</sup> MacIntyre offers illustrative examples of what sorts of activities exactly qualify as ‘practices’ (as he has defined practice). Tic-tac-toe, for example, is not a practice, nor is throwing a football with skill. Chess and the game of football, on the other hand, both qualify as practices. Alongside games as practices, falls ‘the making and sustaining of family.’<sup>574</sup>

Okin’s main issue with MacIntyre is with his characterisation of family life as a practice. Okin views the characterisation of ‘making and sustaining of family’ as a practice as problematic on the basis that family life, unlike playing chess well or football well, is not an elective activity, but one that is essential to human flourishing per se. Without ‘family life’ there would just plainly not be anyone to live the ‘good life.’ Secondly, the configuration of ‘family life’ has always made it difficult, if not impossible for women to live the ‘good life,’ at least as defined by Aristotle’s list of virtues. Okin argues that family life, in particular, requires more ethical scrutiny than other practices, such as chess playing, or football games, which are less necessary to human flourishing and certainly less necessary to the lives of women.

Rather than addressing this issue though, MacIntyre actually denies that family life has even been a ‘practice’ since the eighteenth century. Once production was moved out of the household and into the marketplace, MacIntyre argues that the home no longer can be viewed as belonging to the ‘realm of practices with goods internal to

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<sup>572</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 187.

<sup>573</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 191

<sup>574</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 185



them.<sup>575</sup> Although MacIntyre does not explicitly discuss women in *After Virtue*,<sup>576</sup> in discussing the issue of the transferal of production from the household to the marketplace, he remarks that women's domestic labour as a 'practice' was destroyed.<sup>577</sup> Women's sphere, he notes, became reduced to that of childrearing and 'keeping house':

It is finally in the eighteenth century, when production has moved outside the household, that women no longer for the most part do work not very different in kind or work-relationship from that of men, but are instead divided into two classes: a small group of leisured women with no work to fill the day and for whom occupations have to be invented – fine needlework, the reading of bad novels and organised opportunities for gossip, which are then thought of by both men and women as 'essentially feminine' – and a huge group of women condemned to the drudgery of domestic service or to that of the mill or factory or to prostitution.<sup>578</sup>

According to MacIntyre's criteria for what qualifies as a 'practice,' once this shift occurs, women's opportunities for realizing the various goods of self-development become greatly diminished. Thus, Okin concludes that MacIntyre, by other means, has effectively confined women to the same role as Aristotle confined them. MacIntyre, like Aristotle, fails to recognise the increasing responsibility women have taken up in being the sole carers of children – physically, emotionally and intellectually. Okin points out that it appears that MacIntyre regards the work of pre-industrial women, such as cheese and soap making and raising cattle, as having given women more opportunity to exercise virtue than is available to women in the home today. To deal with the issues of the 'nutritive' and 'growth' has nothing to do with human virtue. So, although MacIntyre has bracketed out Aristotelian biology, he does not offer a version of virtue ethics that successfully addresses the key

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<sup>575</sup> MacIntyre quoted in Okin, 'Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,' 219.

<sup>576</sup> MacIntyre does much later address, or at least acknowledge, some feminist concerns (raised by Elizabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey in the same volume) about his work in this regards. See Alasdair MacIntyre, 'A Partial Response to my Critics,' eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus, *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 289-90. See also Elizabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey, 'MacIntyre, Feminism and the Concept of Practice,' eds. John Horton and Susan Mendus, *After MacIntyre: Critical Perspectives on the Work of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 265-82.

<sup>577</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 239-40.

<sup>578</sup> MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 239-40

feminist concerns to do with ‘equal concern and respect for all human beings.’<sup>579</sup>

Okin concludes her critique of virtue ethics in general with the suggestion that what is needed is a ‘specifically feminist account of the virtues’ and that any ‘list’ of human virtues needs to include ‘the qualities needed to nurture, to take care of those who cannot take care of themselves, and to raise children to an adulthood in which they can both flourish as virtuous citizens and enable others so to flourish.’<sup>580</sup>

According to Okin, it is likely that this may not be an exercise of simply adding to a list of virtues, but it may turn out to be a complete revision of traditional accounts of virtue ethics.<sup>581</sup>

It is clear from Okin’s critique of MacIntyre’s neo-Aristotelian virtue ethical account that his is a virtue ethics little suited to feminism. I do not disagree with Okin on this point. Yet, I maintain that Okin is not rejecting virtue ethics per se, but rather pointing out the perils of an unrevised Aristotelian virtue ethics. I do not disagree that if we simply take a list of virtues and a specific way of life along with its specific history that all that we are likely to find is a reflection of very local traditions and values tied to specific forms of life that may not be conducive to our (contemporary) notions of equality and respect. Indeed, MacIntyre himself makes this very point. It seems very unlikely that there could ever be list of virtues that could serve as normative for all of us at all times. For someone like Okin, who thinks this way, and I add myself here, it is understandable to view Aristotle’s list of the virtues as restrictive and nothing more than a picture of one particular society’s view of ‘salience and ways of distinguishing.’<sup>582</sup> But I want to ask if Okin has it quite right, or if she has missed something. Is this a correct reading of what Aristotle is really doing in the *Nichomachean Ethics*? Can it be read another way? I want to suggest that critiques like those of Okin’s have not fully appreciated what Aristotle is doing and that what Okin is suggesting needs to be done is actually what Aristotle *is* doing. I hope to show both where Okin goes wrong and where she is right, neither of

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<sup>579</sup> Okin, ‘Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,’ 211.

<sup>580</sup> Okin, ‘Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,’ 227-29.

<sup>581</sup> Okin, ‘Feminism, Moral Development, and the Virtues,’ 229.

<sup>582</sup> Martha C. Nussbaum, ‘Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,’ *MidWest Studies in Philosophy*, XIII (1988), 34.

which necessitates a turn away from virtue ethics.

## The 'non-relative virtues' account

Nussbaum suggests that if we look more closely at how Aristotle details and individuates the virtues, it becomes apparent that he is not simply listing all of those virtues that are most admirable in his society.<sup>583</sup> Rather what we find is that a number of virtues and vices are simply not named. Of those that are named, a good many are unsatisfactorily named: 'Most of these are nameless, but we must try...to give them names in order to make our account clear and easy to follow.'<sup>584</sup>

Nussbaum argues that this is hardly indicative of someone undertaking merely a study of local traditions in order to extricate a list of the virtues reflective of those traditions. Nussbaum suggests that the key to understanding what Aristotle is doing lies in the way he introduces his list of virtues, and it is this that she suggests has escaped the notice of most writers on the topic, and I include here Okin.

Nussbaum interprets Aristotle as in fact, in each case, to be isolating a specific sphere of human experience that is present in nearly every human life and furthermore, a sphere within which any human must make some choices over other choices, and act in some manner as opposed to some other manner.<sup>585</sup> Indeed, Nussbaum points out that in 'Book II: Moral Virtue,'<sup>586</sup> in which Aristotle enumerates virtue and vice, he begins with an enumeration of the spheres in which choice takes place. From here Aristotle goes on to pose the following questions: What is it to choose and respond well within sphere X? What is it to choose and respond defectively in sphere X? This leads Aristotle to develop what Nussbaum terms a 'thin account' of the virtues.<sup>587</sup> That is, Aristotle gives an account of each virtue and what it is to appropriately respond in that particular sphere. There are multiple and differing possibilities of what acting appropriately (and well) is in each case. Aristotle then goes on to develop a 'thick account' of the virtues by giving a

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<sup>583</sup> I am not looking here at Nussbaum's 'capabilities approach' yet.

<sup>584</sup> Aristotle quoted in Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,' 34.

<sup>585</sup> Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,' 35.

<sup>586</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103a-1109b26.

<sup>587</sup> Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,' 35.

concrete defence in each case.

Nussbaum extricates a number of spheres of experience that Aristotle enumerates. These spheres include: fear of death, or bodily injury; the appetites and their pleasures; the just distribution of limited resources; personal property; self-respect; community living; care for others; intellectual life; and the planning of one's own life.<sup>588</sup> Each sphere holds a corresponding set of virtues and vices. These spheres of universal experience and choice form the starting point for Aristotle's ethics and are the basis of the enumeration of virtues and vices. The main point, according to Nussbaum, is that there are choices that everyone must make in these spheres. That is, we all have some attitude to our own death, towards ourselves, towards others, etc. As long as we are living a human life, we cannot escape these questions. The virtue or vice term in each case is determined by the sphere of experience to which it is attached.

Enumeration of the virtues is fixed within the spheres of choice, which are necessarily both connected to and limited by our shared condition of human existence. The issue of virtue arises within the context of choice, which is both unavoidable and inescapably problematic. Thus, Nussbaum summarises that there are two stages in Aristotle's approach. First, there is the delineation of the sphere of choice that serves to fix the virtue term. Second, there is the unfolding enquiry into what the appropriate choice in that particular sphere is. This latter enumeration is always revisable. But is the former revisable? This is what Okin wants to know and I take this to be her criticism of both MacIntyre and Aristotle. If the former, spheres of experience (choice) are revisable, then I think that Okin could accept the usefulness of virtue ethical approaches. Nussbaum does not address this question for the reason I think that she does not think that the spheres of experience are revisable.<sup>589</sup>

Although modern day virtue ethics is still in its infancy, since Okin's 1996 critique, there has developed a broad base of work and approaches to virtue ethics. In the next

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<sup>588</sup> Nussbaum, 'Non-Relative Virtues: An Aristotelian Approach,' 35-6.

<sup>589</sup> Something that becomes clearer when I look at her 'capabilities approach' in the final section of this chapter.

section, I look at Tessman's revised virtue ethical account that appears to offer a picture of virtue ethics interpreted in a manner not dissimilar to Nussbaum's interpretation.

## **Lisa Tessman's revised *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics account**

Tessman's *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* is an attempt to rethink *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics in light of conditions of oppression.<sup>590</sup> Tessman's main premise is that 'we' live (in the West) in unjust societies. Those who live privileged lifestyles do so at the expense of various groups, including women, racial and ethnic minorities, gays and lesbians, and people with disabilities. Tessman's main aim is to examine the implications of this political and social landscape for *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics. She raises questions to do with: How does a background of oppression and social injustice force us to rethink the virtues? What does it mean to be virtuous given a background condition of systemic injustice? What traits can be considered virtues? What is the relation between the virtues and flourishing? Is flourishing possible under conditions of oppression?

Tessman's approach is broadly Aristotelian in the sense that she adopts an Aristotelian approach and revises it from a feminist perspective. The conclusion that her revised virtue ethics comes to is one that is (self) avowedly pessimistic:

Something very grim emerges when one tries to work with a *eudaimonistic* moral theory when examining oppression, for one centers (sic) the importance of flourishing and then confronts the terrible fact of its distortion or absence under conditions of oppression.<sup>591</sup>

Rethinking virtue ethics against the backdrop of actual political conditions, according to Tessman, reveals oppression to be even worse than has been previously acknowledged. Oppression, she argues, causes harm in more ways than is normally acknowledged in critiques of injustice and suffering.

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<sup>590</sup> Lisa Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2005).

<sup>591</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 4.

Living under conditions of oppression leads to the experience of what she terms ‘moral trouble.’<sup>592</sup> ‘Moral trouble’ takes two forms: firstly, it is difficult to cultivate the virtues under adverse external conditions; and secondly, those traits that often have to be developed in order to undertake resistance in conditions of oppression are ones that can carry a heavy cost to the carrier. This latter set of virtues is what Tessman terms ‘burdened virtues.’<sup>593</sup> They are virtues that are disjoined from the bearer’s own flourishing.

It would seem that understanding ‘burdened virtues’ as virtues at all would be impossible, but in the final chapter Tessman considers and rejects this. She bases her rejection on the grounds that it is still necessary to have an account of what is possible vis-à-vis flourishing or moral goodness under *actual* conditions of oppression. In order to accomplish this maneuver, Tessman deviates from Aristotle, taking seriously a non-idealistic background picture (the condition of oppression), thereby reconfiguring the relationship between virtue and flourishing as contingent. That is, the ‘insufficiency of virtue for flourishing is often more salient than its necessity.’<sup>594</sup> It is precisely here though that I identify the central problem of Tessman’s reworking of virtue ethics. Although she allows that the relationship between virtue and *eudaimonia* might sometimes be contingent, she still maintains an implicit definition of *eudaimonia*.

In what follows, I concentrate my critique of Tessman’s virtue ethics account around the key issues raised in feminist identity politics. In so doing, I raise the following questions: What is the connection between virtue and flourishing (the good)? Can Tessman’s account deal with the issues raised by diversity feminists? Is the agent thought through as occupying multiple positions/identities?

## **Coping with oppression: the ‘burdened virtues’**

In order to take into account a background of oppression, within a *eudaimonistic*

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<sup>592</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 4.

<sup>593</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 4.

<sup>594</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 160.

virtue ethics, Tessman views it as necessary to emphasise the contingency between virtue and flourishing. Although Aristotle acknowledges that there can be cases when the relationship is contingent, he never considers the possibility that this relationship could be chronic. Yet, Tessman points out that under conditions of oppression, the relationship between virtue and flourishing is constantly disrupted.

Adverse conditions, Tessman argues, can affect what qualifies as a virtue and, in the face of oppression, traits assessed as virtues are unlikely to be the same ones as those that are ‘good for the bearer.’<sup>595</sup> Thus, many of the traits necessary for coping in adverse conditions under oppression are ‘burdened virtues,’ which are not virtues in the usual sense, for they are most often understood only counterfactually as virtues.<sup>596</sup> That is, we can only understand ‘burdened virtues’ as virtues if we employ a ‘counterfactual’ situation in which conditions were better. If, in this way, it can be shown that the ‘burdened virtue’ could connect to the good life, then the burdened virtue plausibly maintains a connection to flourishing. Thus, Tessman maintains, instead of asking which traits succeed in connecting to a good life, traits that have the potential to be (partly) constitutive of the good life despite their ‘burden’ actually function compatibly with flourishing.<sup>597</sup>

Two important issues arise here. Firstly, we need to know how Tessman defines flourishing. And secondly, how does Tessman arrive at an account of the virtues? In regards to the issue of a definition of flourishing, Tessman offers what she calls an ‘implicit’ account.<sup>598</sup> She argues that it is not possible to flourish by accepting existing conditions (of oppression). Enduring and resisting are therefore, virtuous activities, but they are simultaneously harmful ones. Surprisingly she also claims that ‘primarily people occupying dominant rather than subordinate positions of oppression should be understood as morally damaged.’<sup>599</sup> Character traits that allow people in dominant positions to dominate are vices. The moral damage of oppression is so morally damaging that it extends across oppressors, oppressed and resisters.

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<sup>595</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 7.

<sup>596</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 163.

<sup>597</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 163.

<sup>598</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 3.

<sup>599</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 33.

That the extensiveness of oppression is often hidden, and the dominant are most often viewed as living the good life, Tessman argues, is only possible because the good life is conceived from a liberal picture of the individual as self-interested. Against this picture, Tessman takes Aristotle's perspective on humans as inherently social and interdependent. She argues that 'the pursuit of one's own flourishing cannot qualify as morally praiseworthy (and what one attains cannot count as flourishing) unless one is engaged, as part of that pursuit, in promoting the flourishing of an inclusive social collectivity.'<sup>600</sup> Tessman goes further than Aristotle to make the social collectivity inclusive.

Tessman's 'implicit' conception of flourishing and her refusal to delineate it more than this she views as differentiating her account from Nussbaum's.<sup>601</sup> Nussbaum's account of flourishing, of which I will have more to say in the next section, delineates a comprehensive list of human functions and capabilities. Tessman objects to this approach on the basis that it is premised on a liberal conception of the individual as an autonomous chooser.<sup>602</sup> Not only does Tessman object to this on the basis of an inclusive social collectivity, but also for the reason that it cannot account for the damage done to the ability of the agent to make choices about the good life under conditions of oppression. To this point, I agree with Tessman.

Tessman's critical revision of *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics and in particular, the category of 'burdened virtues,' raises the question as to how it is possible to identify the virtues under conditions that render the linkage between virtue and flourishing unreliable. That is, if the burdened virtues fail to enable the bearer to flourish, it seems unlikely that we could work backwards to delineate the virtues from a concept of flourishing. The burdened virtues thus imply that *eudaimonia* must be re-thought in some way that is contrary to one possible pattern of the connection between virtue and *eudaimonia*. Aristotle in fact does not derive the virtues from *eudaimonia*. To

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<sup>600</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 75-6.

<sup>601</sup> In particular, Tessman is referring to: Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>602</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 51.



the contrary, in Aristotle, *eudaimonia* is achieved in knowing (and exercising) the virtues: ‘human good turns out to be activity of soul exhibiting excellence.’<sup>603</sup> Thus, Aristotle does not argue from a prior notion of *eudaimonia* and work backwards to the virtues. Rather, the virtues fall into the definition of *eudaimonia* - not vice versa. From where does Aristotle derive the virtues then? Simply put, from common opinion (*endoxa*).

Tessman points out that many contemporary virtue ethicists, unlike Aristotle, attempt to work from a conception of flourishing to an account of the virtues. This can only succeed though if virtue is both necessary *and* sufficient to flourishing. It can also work roughly even if virtue is not sufficient for flourishing, as long as, most of the time, conditions are conducive to flourishing. But since Tessman is assuming a background condition of oppression, she, of course, argues that ‘the necessary background conditions for flourishing tend not to obtain.’<sup>604</sup> Nor can she begin with a conception of flourishing and move backwards to a list of virtues since she has already made it clear that the connection between virtue and *eudaimonia* is to be thought of as contingent. Thus, if there is not a consistent connection between flourishing and virtue, how does she propose that the virtues are to be determined?

In answer to this question, Tessman distinguishes among four types of virtues, or ‘hypothetical traits’:<sup>605</sup> The first two sets ( $v_1$  and  $v_2$ ) are unburdened virtues that enjoy a non-contingent relation to *eudaimonia*. The latter is chosen when a better virtue is not available, but in its choosing, it is accompanied by the regret that some better virtue could not be exercised due to circumstances outside of the agent’s control. The latter two sets of virtues ( $v_3$  and  $v_4$ ) are burdened virtues of greater degrees, chosen under circumstances in which nothing else is possible. The burdened virtues are chosen because they are the ones that either allow the agent to endure or resist. Thus, they are chosen on the basis that they will (partially) lead to a good life. The  $v_4$  is only appropriately a virtue under conditions of oppression.

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<sup>603</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098<sup>a</sup>17-18.

<sup>604</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 160.

<sup>605</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 163.

The virtues would then appear to be based on the social and political environment within which the agent is embedded. This in itself does not seem problematic, but given this framework it is still difficult to discern how we are to understand the account of *eudaimonia* (flourishing) that underlies Tessman's view. She has already made it clear that, unlike Aristotle, she does not understand flourishing via an account of the virtues.<sup>606</sup> Yet, she leaves open the possibility that we can in some sense understand the virtues via an account of flourishing. Certainly, she denies that we can identify the virtues associated with  $v_3$  and  $v_4$  by simply working backward from an account of flourishing. Nonetheless, it does appear as though a substantive concept of flourishing is being given a central role in her account of the virtues. In fact, it seems as if it is her account of flourishing that allows for the enumeration of which traits it is that ought to be considered virtues (as opposed to vices) and what kind of virtues these traits will be. If I am right, then it would seem that Tessman would articulate and defend a substantive account of flourishing.

To the contrary though, she clarifies that she has no intention of arguing 'for a conception of flourishing.'<sup>607</sup> Rather, Tessman adopts what she describes as 'a general conception of flourishing from what is implicit in the goals of liberatory movements (such as the feminist movements and movements for racial liberation) and use this conception of flourishing as a guide.'<sup>608</sup> Tessman claims that her methodology does not require a particularised account of human flourishing. In explanation of this, she points out that 'searching for the virtues suited for surviving and resisting oppression requires a specific account of human flourishing to a no-greater extent than committing to any particular form of social or political change does.'<sup>609</sup> She holds herself to be committed to the ideas implicit in human flourishing that are present in the goals of liberatory groups: 'Those fighting oppression must *already* hold certain implicit beliefs about what a flourishing or good life is' (my italics).<sup>610</sup> Yet, if all those 'fighting oppression' rely on some notion of flourishing, why not articulate what that notion is? If this were even possible, it would seem to be

<sup>606</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1098<sup>a</sup>16-18.

<sup>607</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 51.

<sup>608</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 51.

<sup>609</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 51-2.

<sup>610</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 52.

a very difficult task. If liberatory political groups do indeed have ‘implicit’ notions of flourishing at all, it would seem that such conceptions would often diverge from one another. For example, the notions of flourishing implicit in the political goals of feminists who identify either as liberal feminists, or radical feminists, or diversity feminists, or socialist feminists are all clearly very divergent. Given that distinct accounts of flourishing are present in varying liberatory movements, it is remarkable that Tessman has not articulated, at the very least, the main tenets of the conception of flourishing she is *implicitly* working with.

It is perhaps this failure to articulate a specific account of human flourishing that explains why it then becomes difficult to determine which character traits ought to be considered virtues and which ones ought to be considered vices. At one point, Tessman lists as vices ‘cruelty, indifference, contempt, and arrogance.’<sup>611</sup> Yet, according to her own classification of the virtues, it is not at all clear that these traits should be listed as vices. Instead it would appear under her system of classification that all of the ‘putative vices’ would rather be classified as burdened virtues. In fact, it would seem that almost any trait could be classified as a  $v_3$  or  $v_4$  trait.

I do not think that Tessman is wrong to insist that resisters (activists) hold implicit beliefs about flourishing and the good life. But what she does not address is what happens to virtue and flourishing and the connection between the two when agents who hold different implicit accounts of flourishing come together to try to work out a shared project. This is after all, the dilemma of a good amount of work in feminist identity politics projects. What are the virtues in these circumstances? What is the connection between virtue and flourishing in these sorts of circumstances? And this brings me to a further and related problematic issue in Tessman’s account of ‘burdened virtues.’

In Tessman’s account, the social and political landscape is drawn around three groups of agents: the oppressed, whose lives are largely determined by the circumstances of oppression; the oppressors, who live lives of dominance made

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<sup>611</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: virtue ethics for liberatory struggles*, 54.

possible through the oppressed; and resisters, or political activists, who work towards ending oppression. The way in which Tessman has delineated these three groupings of agents makes it seem as if individuals are members of only one group or another. This does not allow for an account of how individuals very often, indeed always, simultaneously occupy positions in which they are oppressed, they are dominating and they are resisting. Most movements are made up of individuals who simultaneously occupy many different positions in a given society.

Tessman argues that those fighting oppression must already hold certain implicit beliefs about what a flourishing or a good life is. I want to raise the question of whether ‘holding’ is the same as aiming. That is, do I hold those ‘implicit beliefs’ with the intent to change them in relation to the group I intentionally place myself in or in which I am placed? Surely I may at times not so much ‘hold’ a worked out vision of a flourishing life, but rather have an aim that is being worked out along the way. What of the virtues needed to ‘aim’? Surely it will often be the case that I want a *better* life rather than *the* good life. In this case, it seems to me that we need to keep open the category of the good life, keep open the notion of flourishing. There are many times when we may need to retain flourishing as undefined, as in the process always of being defined and re-defined. It seems that a shift is needed here. My argument is that we need to develop a vocabulary through which we can articulate our differing implicit conceptions of flourishing and a vocabulary through which we can communicate these implicitly held conceptions of flourishing with others – others that we may share an oppressed position with, but that we may also not. How are we to understand the virtues that we need to cultivate and practice in order to do this?

Therefore, I am not saying that I disagree with Tessman on the issue of the articulation of an exact or specific account of flourishing. I think that she is correct in dismissing the possibility, or viability, of specifying in advance a universal notion of flourishing and then working backwards from there to a list of virtues. Where I disagree with her is on the notion that ‘what conception of flourishing should guide one in the search for corresponding virtues’ is to be found in adopting a ‘general

conception of flourishing from what is implicit in the goals of liberatory movements’ and that we can ‘use this conception of flourishing as a guide.’<sup>612</sup> The emphasis, I argue, must be on the former and not on the latter idea. I do not agree that we should assume an ‘implicit’ notion of flourishing and that this can best serve us by placing it at the centre of a virtue ethics. Instead, I think that in order for a virtue ethical framework to be able to do the work that is necessary in identity politics, ‘the good’ must be construed as plural, making it always contestable and something that is not possible to finally settle on, and that this is not possible if the good is given centre stage. Therefore, virtue should not be defined as an end-state of perfection, but rather as an ability to meet the practical demands of the world. In some ways this approach shares similarities with Nussbaum’s capabilities approach, yet also differs. I turn to an assessment of this now.

## Martha Nussbaum’s Human Capabilities Approach

Martha Nussbaum’s ‘capabilities approach’ project holds in common many similarities to Tessman’s. Like Tessman, Nussbaum believes that an Aristotelian virtue ethical framework can provide a deeply accurate critique of the multiple and complex real world situations in which individuals live lives of inequality and oppression. Where Tessman is interested in exploring the ‘burdened virtues’ though, Nussbaum is interested in developing a precise list of what she terms ‘Central Human Capabilities.’<sup>613</sup> Nussbaum’s intention with these ‘Central Capabilities’ is that they should serve as a focus in development work for formulating basic political principles that can form the basis of fundamental constitutional guarantees.<sup>614</sup> Therefore, Nussbaum’s project has its basis in a universalist account of central human functions that is closely related to political liberalism, the latter of which she views as providing a valuable basis for approaching the issue of women’s position in the developing world.<sup>615</sup>

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<sup>612</sup> Tessman, *Burdened Virtues: Virtue Ethics for Liberatory Struggles*, 51.

<sup>613</sup> Martha Nussbaum, ‘Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice,’ *Feminist Economics*, 9, 2-3 (2003), 41-42.

<sup>614</sup> Nussbaum, ‘Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice,’ 40.

<sup>615</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Cambridge University Press: New York, 2000), 5.

Nussbaum's capability approach is based on, and is a critical elaboration of, Amartya Sen's work.<sup>616</sup> In attempting to complete Sen's capability approach (CA), Nussbaum draws on Aristotle's understanding of appropriate human functioning to develop her list of 'Central Human Capabilities.' From Aristotle she takes the view that 'we see the person as having activity, goals and projects – as somehow awe-inspiringly above the mechanical workings of nature, and yet in need of support for the fulfillment of many central projects.'<sup>617</sup> The CA poses the question as to whether or not the human being holds the capability of achieving those specified 'central projects.' Nussbaum argues that the human who is not *capable* of fulfilling her 'central projects' – as opposed to already fulfilling them, which is something very different – is not living a truly human life.<sup>618</sup> From here, Nussbaum generates a list of capabilities that are universally central to all lives of dignity: (1) Life; (2) Bodily health; (3) Bodily integrity; (4) Senses, Imagination, and Thought; (5) Emotions; (6) Practical Reason; (7) Affiliation; (8) Other species; (9) Play; and (10) Political and material control over one's environment.<sup>619</sup>

Nussbaum elaborates extensively on the meaning of the list, but I engage only with some limited aspects that relate to my specific interests. Firstly, according to Nussbaum, the list 'isolates those human capabilities that can be convincingly argued to be of central importance in any human life, whatever else the person pursues or chooses.'<sup>620</sup> Furthermore, the human life as the good life is 'selected for political purposes only.'<sup>621</sup> The list therefore, provides the basic legal principles for constitutional guarantees, human rights laws and development policy. In short, these ten capabilities are basic entitlements without which a society cannot lay claim to justice and thereby clearly delineate what action a state is obligated to take as well as

<sup>616</sup> Amartya Sen, 'Equality of What?,' ed. S.M. McMurrin, *Tanner Lectures on Human Values* (University of Utah Press: Salt Lake City, 1980); *Choice, Welfare and Measurement* (Blackwell: Oxford, UK, 1982); *Commodities and Capabilities* (North-Holland: Amsterdam, 1985); 'Gender and Cooperative Conflicts,' ed. Irene Tinker, *Persistent Inequalities* (Oxford University Press: New York, 1990); *Inequality Re-examined* (Russell Sage and Harvard University Press: New York and Cambridge, NY, 1992).

<sup>617</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 73.

<sup>618</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 73.

<sup>619</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 77-78.

<sup>620</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 74.

<sup>621</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 76.

what action it is prohibited from taking.

Another key point is that, according to Nussbaum, the list is morally pluralistic. That is to say, each component is discrete and independent of any other component worthy of pursuit. No one component should be viewed as subordinate to any other one, or to any generalisable single end. Yet, two capabilities do ‘organise and suffuse all the others, making their pursuit truly human’ and these are practical reason and affiliation.<sup>622</sup>

What all this means is that Nussbaum’s account places emphasis on ongoing activity as the basis for both moral and political choosing. The individual has a variety of distinct functions, habits and dispositions, all of which must be exercised. Not one can be reduced to any another one, nor to a single good that is external, nor to some end. Instead, each should be understood as an end unto itself. The basis of morality is posited as functional and is related to Nussbaum’s recognition an individual’s desires must be taken seriously. Nussbaum insists that ‘the fact that human beings desire something does count; it counts because we think that politics, rightly understood, comes from people and what matters to them, not from heavenly norms.’<sup>623</sup> Yet, Nussbaum is not satisfied to leave it at that for there are decisions that an individual *must* make. This is because not all desires are equally worth pursuing and fulfilling just as there are some habits or dispositions that are not worthy of being reinforced:

[T]he basic intuition from which the capability approach begins, in the political arena, is that certain human abilities exert a moral claim that they should be developed.....Not all actual human abilities exert a moral claim, only the ones that have been evaluated as valuable from an ethical standpoint.<sup>624</sup>

Moral choice is a matter of deliberation. Part of making moral choices about which habits to reinforce and which ones to weaken is the task of deliberating about what sort of character one should aim to develop. That is, one needs to think carefully

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<sup>622</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 84.

<sup>623</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 146.

<sup>624</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 83.

about what sort of person one should aim at becoming. It is for this reason that Nussbaum posits ‘practical reason,’ as universal. ‘Criticism too,’ she writes, ‘is profoundly indigenous to virtually all cultures.’<sup>625</sup> Intelligence, according to Nussbaum is functional. That is, the function of intelligence is to aid the individual in coping with her situation. Nussbaum argues in this regard that ‘the idea of being able to plan and to execute a plan arises without any philosophical backing, out of the struggle of human beings to live in a hostile environment.’<sup>626</sup> This ability to plan – intelligence – is what makes a human being human:

To plan for one’s own life without being able to do so in complex forms of discourse, concern, and reciprocity with other human beings is, again, to behave in an incompletely human way. To take just one example, work, to be a truly human mode of functioning, must involve the availability of both practical reason and affiliation. It must involve being able to behave as a thinking being, not just a cog in the machine.<sup>627</sup>

The goal of Nussbaum’s approach is to advance the capabilities rather than functioning. She argues that to take functioning as the goal of public policy would be to force the individual into some ‘single determinate manner’ and to take away the free choices that the individual would make in line with her own conception of the good and that this could in fact be a violation of their rights.<sup>628</sup> Therefore, ‘where adult citizens are concerned, *capability, not functioning, is the appropriate goal*’ (emphasis in original).<sup>629</sup> It would seem that Nussbaum’s intent here is to provide a worked out basis for political reform without thereby substantiating in advance what it means to live a fully human life. Yet, on what basis does the agent make choices once her minimum CA have been met? Nussbaum focusses on *public* choices only in order to assist individuals in reaching their own individualized goods. Once capabilities have been established, the individual is left to her own accords to evaluate her own specific ends, which can only be surmised to be on this account, arbitrary acts of the ‘will.’ Nussbaum’s list of capabilities are ‘thick accounts’ of virtues

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<sup>625</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 48.

<sup>626</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 67.

<sup>627</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 82.

<sup>628</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 87.

<sup>629</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 87.



and most importantly for her, they are matters of positive freedom in Berlin's sense of the term. The list of capabilities are fundamental entitlements that are to guide Nussbaum's project of thinking about social justice and are meant to contribute to defining what the responsibility of the state is.

At this point, it is perhaps rather difficult to see how this is virtue ethics since it sounds very much like a matter of justice and therefore, morality. Nussbaum's approach is most apparently virtue ethical in its centring of the situation and experience. That is, her approach is empirical rather than experimental: 'like any universal approach, it is only valuable if developed in a relevant way: so we need to worry not just about the structure of the approach, but also about how to flesh out its content in a way that focuses appropriately on women's lives.'<sup>630</sup> This would appear to be a strength and certainly many have lauded Nussbaum on just this point. She looks at women's real experiences with the aim of taking them seriously. The problem arises when on the basis of these real experiences, Nussbaum analytically abstracts universal principles. By doing this, Nussbaum is unable to either give an account of the dynamic nature of experience or of the possibility of reconstruction, or in Foucault's language, transformation.

In summary, Nussbaum's virtue ethical approach (CA) is more appropriately categorised as a moral system rather than ethics as I have defined the terms in Chapter Four. That is, CA focuses on the external world of relations and actions and not in a meaningful way on the inner life of the self. In contrast, a virtue ethics that is non-eudaimonistic begins from personal reflection on life and the reflective capacities of the individual and views an agent's activities as crucial factors in ethics. In the end, I take Nussbaum's CA to be about morality as opposed to ethics.

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<sup>630</sup> Nussbaum, *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach*, 71.

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted some general feminist concerns to do with an Aristotelian inspired virtue ethics by taking Okin's critique of virtue ethics as paradigmatic. Okin rightly raises the issue of an unrevised list of Aristotle's virtues, but I argue that her approach, is in some ways an incomplete understanding of Aristotle's approach itself. I then turn to elaborate this argument. It is an error to read Aristotle as offering in some sense, a prior list of values and that from this list we should see how it is that self-reflection contributes to the virtues. Instead, there is scope for an enquiry into how a reflecting self would fill out the idea of choice-worthiness. This allows, not for an argument to be developed for a certain kind of life, but to look at how reflective activities that raise the question of value contribute to a good life along various dimensions of value.

I then turned to Tessman's work, which raises the question as to whether or not it is necessary to have eudaimonia take centre stage in a feminist virtue ethics. Her answer is yes, though with some considerable critical revision to eudaimonia. Though I do not take issue with her critical revisions to eudaimonia, I do not agree that eudaimonia must, or indeed should, take centre stage. In fact, granting the notion of eudaimonia centre stage, ushers in the danger of rendering the notion of 'the good' incontestable and finalisable. The usefulness of a virtue ethical approach to understanding the self can only be fully realised when eudaimonia is not posited as either explicit or implicit, but only as fully contestable. This loosens the connection more profoundly between the virtues and eudaimonia and also allows for developing the virtues for ends other than eudaimonia.

My assessment of Nussbaum's work is that she is formulating an argument of what the responsibilities of the government should be in ensuring that certain (human) capabilities can be enjoyed by all citizens of a given nation/state. This is, on the face of it, a project with an entirely different aim than mine. What

Nussbaum helps to clarify is that engaging with virtue ethics opens up a range of possibilities in regards to human flourishing which seem diametrically opposed. On the one hand, she seems to endorse a universal account of human flourishing while on the other hand she seems to endorse a relativist account that accepts any version of flourishing that the agent defines at some point in time for herself. I argue that it is necessary to avoid both of these positions. Nussbaum though, unequivocally endorses the former position and gives what she argues is a universal account of human flourishing. Her CA lists those human capabilities that all governments of states should provide support for and that governments should be pressured to guarantee to all citizens to be so enabled. Nussbaum's project is simultaneously committed to Aristotelian virtue ethics *and* modern liberalism. It is liberal in the sense that she relies on an account of human nature that assumes that agents are autonomous decision makers, thus she privileges the agent's capability to choose, develop and maintain the functions necessary for choice making. Nussbaum's work is therefore, problematic for my project on the basis that she endorses a universal and spelled out account of human flourishing. Furthermore, her account is premised on a conception of the agent as an autonomous self-chooser.

In the following chapter I turn to a pluralistic virtue ethical account and show how it elaborates a self (identity) that is inextricably related to the good, where the notion of the good is not finally definable. I address the central notion of 'desire' as comprised of both 'vision' and 'attention' in order to illustrate a picture of the self with the full resources of an inner life that can be retrieved in a pluralistic version of virtue ethics. Beginning from an understanding of virtue not as an end state of perfection, but as a 'dynamic process-notion',<sup>631</sup> a number of ethical concepts - love, respect, creativity and objectivity – make up the inner life and workings of the agent and have a pervasive influence on virtue as a whole.

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<sup>631</sup> Christine Swanton, 'Nietzschean Virtue Ethics,' 192.

## Pluralistic virtue ethics and the self

### Introduction

In this chapter, I draw mainly on the recent work of Christine Swanton.<sup>632</sup> This is emergent and underdeveloped work as yet, but I believe it can be developed in interesting and constructive ways that can, as Murdoch called for, offer an ‘elaborate normative vocabulary’ sufficient for developing a moral vision. It has the potential to enriched our understanding and articulation of the problematics in identity politics debates. I do not attempt to engage fully with Swanton’s challenging and complex pluralistic theory of virtue ethics. The reading that I propose of her work is a charitable one. I choose not to emphasise shortcomings or inconsistencies. Although I could have offered a much more critical reading, my aim is to lay out the main structures of her pluralistic approach to virtue ethics so as to point out the possible intersections between the problematics of feminist identity politics and a pluralistic account of virtue ethics. A more detailed critical discussion awaits a future study. Since my goal is not to evaluate Swanton’s pluralistic virtue ethics (PVE) as a whole and its possible contribution, as a whole, to feminist theory, or certainly to virtue ethics, my reading of her is necessarily partial. I intend to make the more limited argument that a PVE develops an agent who can forge and sustain the sort of alliances across difference that identity politics requires. In short, PVE offers a picture of an agent who is capable of articulating Brown’s ‘I want this for us.’ Because this thesis has argued that the picture of the self that will be capable of doing this necessitates a complex and rich inner life, therefore, this is what I concentrate on in Swanton’s work. I draw primarily from Part 2 of her *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, which details the ‘basic modes of moral acknowledgment’ that feature in all of the virtues and includes love,

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<sup>632</sup> Christine Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

respect, and creativity for it is these – ‘the basic modes of moral acknowledgment’ - that comprise the inner life of the agent.<sup>633</sup>

Swanton’s PVE account is not a eudaimonistic virtue ethics in the standard sense since it loosens the standard connection between eudaimonia and virtue. This loosening allows for a focus on and development of a certain kind of an agent, and what capacities need to be present in an agent in order to articulate a vision (of the future) that is about the (common) good. I am most interested in what a pluralistic virtue ethical account can offer with regard to the dynamic relationship between agents and the good. How does a pluralistic virtue ethical project elaborate the inner life and capacities of the agent necessary for articulating a vision of the good when eudaimonia is not given centre stage in a way that is finalisable?

Since Swanton’s pluralistic conception of virtue ethics that I am drawing on uses the term ‘pluralism’ in the sense in which it is understood in moral philosophy, rather than political philosophy, I use the first section of the chapter to clarify these different usages. While the term ‘pluralism’ is an important one in feminist theory, its usage in moral philosophy differs considerably.

Section two offers an overview of Swanton’s PVE account. Although inspired by Aristotle’s notion of virtue as an end state of perfect responsiveness to the demands of the world, in taking a Nietzschean lead, Swanton recovers the complex dynamics of the dissatisfied attitude in Nietzsche’s ‘will to power.’ This allows for a much more flexible virtue ethics that is better equipped to meet the complexities of an imperfect world. The following section highlights how this approach delineates virtue in a thoroughgoing pluralism.

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<sup>633</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, see ‘Part II: Profiles of the Virtues,’ 99-167. I also draw to a lesser extent on two recent papers of hers, which delve deeper into a justification of her usage of Nietzsche as a virtue ethicist. These are: Christine Swanton, ‘Nietzschean Virtue Ethics,’ 179-192; Christine Swanton, ‘Can Nietzsche be Both an Existentialist and a Virtue Ethicist?,’ ed. Timothy Chappell; Christine Swanton, *Values and Virtues: Aristotelianism in Contemporary Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 171-188.

Section four offers an overview of how it is that Swanton's PVE is non-eudaimonistic. The core notion of expressing a virtue, since it is not solely eudaimonia, is provided instead through three central modes of 'moral acknowledgment,' or responsiveness. It is these that form the framework through which all of the virtues are filtered and constitute the inner life of the self. Therefore in the final section I look at what I call 'the responsive self.' The central modes of responsiveness are 'love, respect, and creativity.' Combined, these modes constitute the ways in which the agent responds to someone (or something). Love, respect and creativity have in common the core concerns of (feminist) identity politics raised earlier in Chapter Two, and this is the topic of the following section four. It turns out, unsurprisingly, that love and respect constitute the framework through which 'care of the self' operates and the section closes by looking at this. The chapter ends by reflecting on how a PVE appears to solve the issues of how the self can be related to and engaged with a vision of the (common) good that is able to contextualise the self while at the same time maintaining a strong notion of the self as an agent capable of self-reflection and action.

## Pluralism

The term 'pluralism' in moral philosophy is most generally associated with 'moral pluralism' and is distinguishable from 'political pluralism' in political liberalism. The latter refers to an incommensurability of value systems and what sorts of restrictions a government can impose on the freedoms of its citizens' to act according to their own value systems. In moral philosophy, 'pluralism' is a structural issue and takes as its concern the complexity of moral values and moral choices. Therefore, in moral philosophy, the debate on pluralism has to do with the shape of morality. That is, 'pluralism in ethics is the view that there is an irreducible plurality of values or principles that are relevant.'<sup>634</sup> The concern of moral pluralism is not with competing value

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<sup>634</sup> Susan Wolf, 'Two Levels of Pluralism,' *Ethics*, Volume 102, Number 4 (July 1992), 785.

systems or points of view, but with differing values. In other words, pluralism is the 'the notion that the multiple elements of a theory....are both problematic and uneliminable.'<sup>635</sup>

In moral theory, pluralism is contrasted to monism. Whereas pluralism argues that there are multiple, irreducible values, monism claims that there is fundamentally one value. For the monist, the 'good' is fundamentally unitary. In monism, the single property that is constitutive of the good, or the right, is meant to be discoverable independently of the social situation or dialogic encounter. Consider how utilitarianism holds that all that is morally relevant can be reduced to a single principle to do with pleasure or pain and how Kantian derived philosophy holds that all moral judgments can be derived from a single principle to do with respect for rationality. By sidestepping what are complex, socially grounded and essentially contested standards defined by thick concepts, monism ends up reasoning in terms of thin concepts of the 'good' and the 'right.'<sup>636</sup>

Unlike monism, pluralism insists that there are many and diverse responses appropriate to value:

According to value centred monism, the rightness of moral responsiveness is determined entirely by degree or strength of value..... on the contrary, just how things are to be pursued, nurtured, respected, loved, preserved, protected, and so forth may often depend on further general features of those things, and their relations to other things, particularly the moral agent.<sup>637</sup>

Pluralism, in contrast, is fundamentally more complex than either of utilitarian or Kantian accounts.<sup>638</sup> In pluralism, there are multiple bases upon which the moral responses of an agent are formed and these are irreducibly plural. In contrast, it is possible that a monistic approach could hold that there are

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<sup>635</sup> Lawrence C. Becker, 'Places for Pluralism,' *Ethics*, Volume 102, Number 4 (July 1992), 708.

<sup>636</sup> Elizabeth Anderson, *Value in ethics and economics* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 118.

<sup>637</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 41.

<sup>638</sup> Wolf, 'Two Levels of Pluralism,' 785.

different appropriate responses to value, but always to the same value (i.e. pleasure). According to the pluralist though, the monistic account cannot capture adequately what is really going on when agents appropriately pursue, nurture, respect, etc. a value rather than simply try to promote it. According to a pluralistic approach, the complexity of the agent's responses to value can only accurately be explained pluralistically.

This is not to overlook that many moral theories do allow pluralistic accounts of underlying moral (and nonmoral) values. But this does not mean that they are pluralistic as a whole or from the bottom up.<sup>639</sup> For instance, although Rawls' theory has two principles of justice, they follow a lexicographical ordering that points to which of the principles is the one to be followed in varied situations.<sup>640</sup> Pluralism, on the other hand, insists that morality is fundamentally much more complex than this.<sup>641</sup> Agents do not *only* respond to what is deemed of value with either, for example, desire or pleasure. Instead, agents are likely to respond with love, admiration, respect, affection, or awe.

If values are plural then so too are choices that are made between values. The pluralist argues against the monist view that all values other than one basic one are instrumental. In pluralism, the complexities are much deeper than this – they are foundational. Thus, there are many values that are not valuable because of something else, but are valuable in and of themselves. It is because there are multiple foundational values that comparing values becomes difficult. It is this that makes *choosing* a complex task word. How are choices to be made between multiple, incomparable values? How are disagreements to be resolved in moral pluralism?

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<sup>639</sup> Becker, 'Places for Pluralism,' 708.

<sup>640</sup> In 'The Priority of Liberty Defined,' Rawls maintains that the principles of justice are to be ranked in lexical order: 'By the priority of liberty I mean the precedence of the principle of equal liberty over the second principle of justice. The two principles are in lexical order and therefore the claims of liberty are to be satisfied first. Until this is achieved no other principle comes into play.' See Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, 220, 214.

<sup>641</sup> Wolf, 'Two Levels of Pluralism,' 785.



In pluralism disagreements are instances when a plurality of values does not yield a uniquely right answer. Incompatible positions can be grounded in sound reasoning when multiple perspectives, or principles, can be called upon to resolve an issue. This is incompatible with the monistic view that there is always a definite and right position to be taken. This indeterminacy in pluralism would seem to point towards it being nothing more than a form of relativism or subjectivism. Wolf points out that pluralism does not deny moral truth.<sup>642</sup> The pluralist position is better understood as believing that if there is a moral truth, the truth is more complicated than the monist position, and it is complex in a way that renders the answers to certain questions indeterminate. Whereas the relativist holds the view that what is right for her is not the same as what is right for you, the pluralist position holds that for each of us, what is right in some instances will always be indeterminate. On this latter view, what is right is not relative to anything else, it is simply indeterminate. But if there is no right answer does this not mean that anything goes?

Wolf points out that having no determinate answer does not imply that there is no wrong answer.<sup>643</sup> Maintaining that two positions on a given issue are both reasonable is not the same as holding that any position is reasonable. Reaching resolution on hard moral questions is hard work. What may appear to be irresolvable today, may be resolved tomorrow. The main point of the pluralist position is that although one should not lose sight of the possibility of agreement, one should also not interpret agreement as simply a matter of 'luck,' but rather the result of hard work.

Pluralism is situated within a social context, or dialogic encounter, while monism is embedded in an arbitrarily narrow set of concerns. To adopt a theory of value, according to the pluralist account, amounts to taking on a particular way of understanding what a worthwhile life is. It is the way through which we explore new possibilities for living and life. By bracketing out an appreciation for a wider array of values, monism drastically reduces the possibilities of a

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<sup>642</sup> Wolf, 'Two Levels of Pluralism,' 789.

<sup>643</sup> Wolf, 'Two Levels of Pluralism,' 790.

rich understanding of defining a good life and the good thus, diminishing the possibility of making meaningful evaluative distinctions. Monism erects barriers to the more fruitful avenues of exploration and criticism available to the pluralistic approach. Reaching moral agreements for the pluralist is not a matter of ‘brute, blind luck.’<sup>644</sup> Rather, it is a matter of hard work contra that ‘human longing for simplicity’ and ‘completeness.’<sup>645</sup>

I turn now to a brief summary of Christine Swanton’s pluralistic account of virtue ethics. Swanton follows on a first wave of writers, ranging from Alasdair MacIntyre to Philippa Foot, who took up Anscombe’s 1958 challenge.<sup>646</sup> Swanton’s *Virtue Ethics: A pluralistic view*<sup>647</sup> is distinctive in its attempt to articulate a pluralistic, as opposed to monistic, understanding of virtue ethics.

## Main features of a pluralistic virtue ethics

Swanton develops a complex Nietzschean inspired virtue ethics in which the notion of a virtue is defined through the notion of ‘becoming.’ This is in opposition to Aristotelian conceptions of virtue which are defined as ‘end-states of perfection.’<sup>648</sup> Swanton presupposes no such state of perfection. Contrary to neo-Aristotelian formulations of virtue ethics, her virtue ethical account does not seek to present a worked out list of the virtues tied to eudaimonia. Rather, she argues against both eudaimonistic virtue ethics and virtue ethical conceptions of rightness. Swanton’s approach locates the rationale for virtue in its ability to meet the practical demands of the world.

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<sup>644</sup> Wolf, ‘Two Levels of Pluralism,’ 790.

<sup>645</sup> Wolf, ‘Two Levels of Pluralism,’ 790.

<sup>646</sup> Anscombe is generally attributed with the attack on the notions of obligation and universalism and pointing the way towards a more virtue-oriented ethics. In her 1958 article, Anscombe argues that modern approaches take a law-like approach to ethics, viewing morality based upon law of some form, and indicating as its primary concern the defining of duties and obligations (deontology). This trend in morality became entrenched with the rise of Christianity, seeing as it does morality as proceeding from divine law. Instead of viewing morality in terms of the virtues, as the Greeks did, modern philosophers began to think of morality in terms of obligation: ‘[i]n consequence of the dominance of Christianity for many centuries, the concepts of being bound, permitted or excused became deeply embedded in our language and thought.’ See G.E.M. Anscombe, ‘Modern Moral Philosophy,’ *Philosophy* 33 (1958), 1-18.

<sup>647</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*.

<sup>648</sup> Swanton, ‘Nietzschean Virtue Ethics,’ 187.

Although inspired in her work by the Aristotelian idea that ‘virtue is a state of appropriate responsiveness to, or acknowledgement of the demands of the world,’<sup>649</sup> Swanton views Aristotle as not having provided a sufficient conception of the relation between the demands of the world and the flourishing of the possessor of the virtues. This shortcoming she attributes to Aristotle’s failure to develop a deep account of flourishing. She attributes this to Aristotle’s view that the work of normative ethical theory consists of ‘rendering coherent the *endoxa* (the beliefs of the many, of the wise, or common opinion).’<sup>650</sup>

Swanton argues that a richer account of human flourishing, independent of the *endoxa*, is what is needed to play the role of ‘background theory.’<sup>651</sup> And this is only possible by taking more seriously the ‘richness and complexity of the moral domain.’<sup>652</sup> Although she views modern-day accounts of virtue ethics as having made some progress in taking this domain more seriously, she insists that a more radical connection must be made between ethics and concrete phenomena. While most accounts of virtue ethics hold that the complexity of a situation lies in the complexity of the situation itself, Swanton argues against this. Instead, complexity lies in the area of the enumeration of the virtues and this complexity can only be made apparent when a ‘background theory’ is articulated clearly.<sup>653</sup> Only when this is in place will it become apparent that it is the delineation of virtue itself which is what is most complex.

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<sup>649</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 8.

<sup>650</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 8. At the very beginning of Book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle observes his philosophical method: ‘We must, as in all other cases, set the apparent facts before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinion about these affections of the mind, or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative; for if we both resolve the difficulties and leave the common opinions undisturbed, we shall have proved our case sufficiently.’ See Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1145<sup>a</sup>38-45.

<sup>651</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 8-9.

<sup>652</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 8.

<sup>653</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 9

Swanton, like Okin, does not believe that the task of virtue ethics is to supply a list of the virtues. Rather, the task of virtue ethics is to articulate the complexity of the task of enumerating the virtues. This is illustrated in Swanton's discussion of the difficulties of distinguishing virtue from vice. Here Swanton draws on the work of Karen Horney who makes the observation that we are guilty of committing the 'naturalistic fallacy' in any given situation, for the tendency we have to place too much emphasis on the actual situation. We are mistakenly led to believe that it is the situation that determines our reactions and not the other way around: '[w]e are inclined to put too great an emphasis on the actual situation, and to think that it determines our reactions.'<sup>654</sup> Horney suggests that our 'reactions' in any given situation are determined not only by the situation itself, but also ('even more') by what she refers to as 'our neurotic needs.'<sup>655</sup> The important point Swanton is making in relation to Horney here is that 'the task of delineating virtue inherits the complexities of the task of understanding psychic health.'<sup>656</sup> In other words, it is the inner life of the self that is an integral component of *any* conception of the self.

Aristotle viewed human beings as growing and maturing in a more or less healthy manner in spite of some interferences. In Aristotle we do not find a developed view of healthy human growth and the misfortunes which interfere (regularly) with this, points Tessman and Okin also make. Swanton argues that a 'background theory' (of human nature) that can account for interferences to healthy growing and maturing is necessary to broaden Aristotle's equilibrium. In order to develop this, she draws on depth psychology and some of the insights of Nietzsche.

While the linchpin of Aristotle's conception of human nature is *ergon* – the idea of a distinctively human rationality – Nietzsche's is the 'will to power.' Recall that Nietzsche's 'will to power' is the idea that 'a living thing desires

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<sup>654</sup> Karen Horney quoted in Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 10.

<sup>655</sup> Horney quoted in Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 10. Note the confluence here with Murdoch's same point.

<sup>656</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 10

above all to vent its strength – a life as such is will to power.’<sup>657</sup> Swanton points out that at the centre of Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ are both self-love and creativity, something that is often unappreciated or forgotten. It is these elements that form the basis of Nietzsche’s account of the healthy agent. If the agent lacks either of these, the agent reverts into *ressentiment*.

Swanton elaborates on the how the element of self-love in Nietzsche’s ‘will to power’ involves a dissatisfied attitude to the self as it is. That is, self-love should be understood dynamically in the sense that it requires the self to think of herself as worthy of further discovery and further improvement. Dynamic self-love affirms the self and opposes this dynamic affirmation to a complacent attitude towards who the self is. Therefore, self-love is distinct from self-satisfaction. Love for the other incorporates self-love and distinguishes it from bad love. Self-love understood in this way can be seen as incorporating the principle of ‘care of the self’ that Foucault recovers.

It is true that, as Brown has pointed out and raised concerns over, Nietzsche is located within the tradition of existentialism which emphasises individualism. Although this emphasis appears to be anathema to the collective projects of identity politics, which require identification with others, it is an individualism that is not to be equated with egoism. Rather, it is premised on, and this is the element that Swanton develops, self-love understood as healthy bonding with oneself where the self does not seek an escape from oneself, but instead a turning towards oneself to change and develop – to transform in a manner very similar to Foucault’s ‘care of the self.’ Therefore, we can see that in drawing on Nietzsche, Swanton’s account of virtue ethics is not a ‘species of ideal world theory,’ but is meant to be applicable to an imperfect world. It is for this reason that Swanton does not accept that virtue has to stand in ‘for whatever turns out to be the basis in human psychology, once that is developed to perfection, for leading the best life.’<sup>658</sup> Nor is there any single, unified

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<sup>657</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Walter K. Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1966), 13, 14.

<sup>658</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 14.

condition constituting the basis of virtue.<sup>659</sup> It is for this reason that Swanton differs from most neo-Aristotelian virtue ethics in her rationale for virtue. In Swanton, virtue is a ‘threshold concept,’<sup>660</sup> by which she means that the rationale of virtue is to meet the demands of the world. Because virtue is tasked with dealing with an imperfect world, Swanton argues that the delineation of the virtues should be made according to a ‘pluralistic taxonomy of fields of virtue.’<sup>661</sup>

## A pluralistic account of virtue

Similar to other accounts of virtue ethics, Swanton defines virtue as a disposition to respond well to the demands of the world in a manner that is expressive of, rather than only compatible with, fine inner states. What is distinctive about Swanton’s approach is her argument that plurality characterises all aspects of virtue, which leads to a fully pluralistic account in the following five ways:<sup>662</sup>

- (1) The ‘bases of responsiveness’ are plural.<sup>663</sup> An item to be responded to by the agent is very likely to have more than one single morally relevant feature. For instance, we may respond to something on the basis of a bond, or due to the item’s status, because of its value.
- (2) The ‘modes of responsiveness’ are plural.<sup>664</sup> The way in which an agent responds to someone or something is likely to be plural – her response may be through honouring, loving, respecting, etc.
- (3) Because (1) and (2) are plural, a monistic conception of what makes a trait a virtue is ruled out. Rather, what makes traits of character virtues is plural.

<sup>659</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 14.

<sup>660</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 23-4.

<sup>661</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 14-15.

<sup>662</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 1-3.

<sup>663</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 1.

<sup>664</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 2.

- (4) Virtue is a threshold concept. The standard of what makes responsiveness to items in the field of a virtue excellent or good enough are plural. The standards are to a certain extent relative to the agent's capacities (understood dynamically) and not necessarily only in relation to eudaimonia.
- (5) The 'rightness of action' is also pluralistic with regards to a conception of the right.<sup>665</sup> Since the above are all pluralistic, it follows that a conception of right action also is.

In contrast to a monistic conception of virtue, where a mode of responsiveness to items in its field is singular,<sup>666</sup> Swanton's pluralistic account sees the requirements of virtues, as well as the virtues themselves, as plural. Thus, the standards for meeting a virtue are plural rather than set by one abstract standard. Virtues, in Swanton's pluralistic account, are 'dispositions of responsiveness to items in the world and these items have morally significant features (such as status, value, or a good) which shape requirements for appropriateness of response.'<sup>667</sup>

'The field of a virtue' refers to those items which fall into the spheres of concern of the virtues, and to which the agent should respond in line with virtue's demands.<sup>668</sup> Swanton understands the 'items that fall into the field of virtue' broadly to include the following: 'people, objects, situations, inner states, or actions,' as well as, abstract ideas and one's self.<sup>669</sup>

Swanton argues that there are significant differences in both the kinds of morally significant features that items have as well as the manner of appropriate response to those items. The former are the 'bases of moral responsiveness,' which include such things as value, status, good (or benefit), and bonds. The latter are 'the modes of moral responsiveness' and these include: promoting, honouring, appreciating,

<sup>665</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 2.

<sup>666</sup> For instance, in Slote's monistic virtue ethics where care is the singular virtue. See Michael Slote, 'Agent-Based Virtue Ethics,' *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, Volume 20, Number 1 (September 1995), 83-101.

<sup>667</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 5.

<sup>668</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 20.

<sup>669</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 1.

respecting, being open to, and loving items which have value, or status, are good, or to which one is bonded. It is the modes of love, respect and creativity, which thread through her entire argument and which, in the next sections I look at in more detail.

The ‘modes of moral responsiveness’ are integrated in the virtues pluralistically. Swanton makes the claim that the virtues exhibit multiple ‘modes of moral acknowledgement’ such that, for example, the virtue of justice may require that items in its field be acknowledged through several different modes (promote, honour, appreciate, respect, etc.). This pluralistic account of the ‘modes of moral responsiveness’ acknowledges the ‘complexity of human responsiveness in the world, recognising that we are beings, not only agents of change in the attempt to promote the good, but also agents of change in the attempt to produce and create.’<sup>670</sup> That is, the agent is a person who has projects that are in the future.<sup>671</sup> But what exactly constitutes virtuous moral acknowledgement (responsiveness)?

The account Swanton’s PVE develops sets the standard of virtuous responsiveness as ‘excellent or good enough.’<sup>672</sup> That is, virtue is to be understood as a ‘threshold concept,’<sup>673</sup> which means that the standards of any virtue are always relative to a particular context. An aspect of a standard of ‘good enough’ responsiveness to items in a virtue’s field is that it is this standard that sets limits to moral demands. This is what Swanton refers to as ‘the shape’ of the virtues - it is the specification of the demands that gives the shape of any given virtue.

This thoroughgoing plurality and its concomitant complexity render the matter of the virtues a delicate matter. Virtues can easily be mistaken for, or can become, related vices. In an imperfect world, Swanton argues, virtue must be understood as a ‘threshold concept,’ the central distinguishing feature of which is the expression of fine inner states.<sup>674</sup> For Swanton, this is an aspect of the ‘profile of the virtues’ for each mode of moral acknowledgement comprising that profile (i.e. promoting,

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<sup>670</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 23.

<sup>671</sup> Note that this is reminiscent of Foucault’s moral elements of ‘curiosity and innovation.’

<sup>672</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 14.

<sup>673</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 23-4.

<sup>674</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 24-25.



honouring, appreciating, respecting, being open to, and loving items which have value, or status, are good, or to which one is bonded). This aspect appears to be the most complex and difficult to come to terms with. How after all, are we to know if virtue expresses fine inner states? But it is precisely on this point that a virtue-ethical account is to be distinguished from a consequentialist view.<sup>675</sup> In contrast to a consequentialist conception of moral acknowledgment, which requires neither good motives nor good intentions, Swanton's conception of virtue acknowledges the modes of moral acknowledgment as plural and as requiring the expression of fine inner states.

Some versions of consequentialism and Kantianism also require of virtue that it is an expression of fine inner states. Yet Swanton argues that it is still possible to distinguish virtue ethics from both consequentialist and Kantian accounts on the basis of the *nature* of the fine inner states. Whereas the consequentialist has a 'standing commitment'<sup>676</sup> to act from the objective of leading a consequentialist life and the Kantian has a 'standing commitment' to perform her duty, the virtue ethicist:

...in short, claim[s] that moral responsiveness expressive of virtue must express fine inner states, and amongst those states will be a background motivation of acting from virtue.<sup>677</sup>

Whereas Aristotle assumes that practical wisdom is necessary for all virtue, Swanton does not maintain that certain internal states are necessary for a certain trait to be considered a virtue. Instead, Swanton follows Nietzsche's lead in downplaying the role of practical wisdom. This serves to disconnect the usual tight connection between virtue and eudaimonism in standard accounts of virtue ethics. I now want to turn to look at how Swanton formulates her argument against eudaimonism for it is here that Swanton's pluralistic view of virtue ethics finds its basis and I think is most useful for thinking about the work of the agent in identity politics.

<sup>675</sup> Swanton points out that this is similar to Julia Driver's consequentialist view of virtue ethics, which holds that 'a character trait (a disposition or cluster of dispositions) which, generally speaking, produces good consequences for others.' See Julia Driver, 'The Virtues and Human Nature,' ed. Roger Crisp, *How Should One Live?: essays on the virtues* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 122.

<sup>676</sup> Swanton borrows this term from Peter Railton, 'Alienation, Consequentialism and Morality,' *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Volume 13 (1984), 134-171.

<sup>677</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 29.

## A non-eudaimonistic account

Swanton grants the assumption to eudaimonism that in order to be (fully) good qua human being it is necessary to flourish.<sup>678</sup> It does not follow then that, even if virtue is (partially) constitutive of goodness, it is a necessary condition of a trait being a virtue that it is characteristically (partially) constitutive of (or contributes to) the flourishing of the agent. Swanton argues that this is because there are cases when at least some of the virtues might contribute to certain aspects of a human's goodness other than her flourishing. Here we can see that Swanton's account does not differ significantly from Tessman's account.<sup>679</sup> In fact, Swanton seems to be in agreement with Tessman that some virtues might turn out to be detrimental to flourishing whilst, actually making that contribution. Swanton though is very clearly making a separation between 'goodness' and 'flourishing' that Tessman does not. Therefore, Swanton specifies her position that there are some virtues that are inimical to flourishing though they may be (partially) constitutive of goodness. That is, we can act virtuously for reasons other than eudaimonism. This other reason is not one that is possible in Tessman's account where agents *always* exercise the virtues for reasons connected to eudaimonism (even if sometimes this is only implicit).

Illustrating this argument, Swanton considers three kinds of lives. I find it instructive to look in detail at her account as it serves to clarify where Swanton's account diverges from Tessman's in a direction that I argue is most useful for developing an account of the self in ethics for identity politics. None of the lives Swanton discusses display traits that appear to be indicative of 'flourishing',<sup>680</sup> yet all do appear to display virtues since 'they are lives characterised by habits of appropriate response' (to value, bonds, benefits, etc.).<sup>681</sup>

The first example is of a woman who has gone into the jungle to work ceaselessly to save lives and relieve suffering of those who would otherwise have perished. The

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<sup>678</sup> Hursthouse, Foot and Annas place eudaimonia as flourishing at the heart of ethics. Swanton on the other hand, would have us understand eudaimonia as flourishing but reduce its role in moral theory.

<sup>679</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 80.

<sup>680</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 81.

<sup>681</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 81.

work and the tropical environment have made the woman herself ill and she is suffering from malaria and dysentery. Despite suffering from ill health and exhaustion though, the woman continues to work without rest. Furthermore, she is plagued with self-doubt about the work she does. Since the woman is not religious, she cannot mitigate her suffering by the sort of joy experienced by religiously inspired saints. She is not the ‘moral saint’ Wolf describes for whom ‘happiness would truly lie in the happiness of others and so would devote [her]self to others gladly and with an open heart.’<sup>682</sup> Having seriously compromised her health, the woman dies prematurely.

Swanton’s second example is of an artist who suffers from a manic-depressive illness. The artist, though afflicted by on-going self-doubt, nonetheless feels strongly that she is talented and through her art has something important to say. Since the artist’s creative energy is at its strongest during the manic phases of her mental condition, she refuses to seek or receive treatment for her disorder. Never gaining recognition for her artistic endeavours, plagued with constant feelings of failure, she eventually commits suicide. Even after her death, her art does not achieve the hoped for recognition.

Swanton’s third example is of an environmental activist who foresees an environmental disaster that will not occur in his lifetime. The activist has no immediate family and works tirelessly to persuade others of the impending disaster. He is never taken seriously in his lifetime. Under a tremendous amount of stress, he dies suddenly of a heart attack. After his death, the public takes notice of his work and the danger he had warned of is heeded and subsequently, his work is appreciated.

None of the individuals in the Swanton’s three examples can be said to have lived lives in which they flourished. Yet, according to Swanton, the life of the aid worker is certainly admirable and successful - she saved many lives that would otherwise not have been saved. The life of the artist, although not successful, Swanton views as

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<sup>682</sup> Susan Wolf, ‘Moral Saints,’ *Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 79 (1982), 419-39, at 420.

having been admirable – it was ‘an admirable failure.’<sup>683</sup> The life of the environmentalist was successful, in that his life’s work was appreciated after his death. All of the lives, Swanton argues, were certainly meaningful and exhibit a sort of excellence that is excluded from view by an Aristotelian approach.

In order to bring into view the excellence that is excluded from an Aristotelian and eudaimonistic approach to the virtues, Swanton argues that a pluralistic understanding of virtue is necessary. That is, what makes a trait a virtue ‘is that it is a disposition to respond in an excellent (or good enough) way (through the modes of respecting, appreciating, creating, loving, promoting, and so on) to items in the fields of the virtue.’<sup>684</sup> Swanton terms this ‘principle (T),’ which allows for not simply one ultimate point to virtue (flourishing), but rather for the possibility that there may be a plurality of ‘ultimate points.’<sup>685</sup> That is, there are other grounds for a trait’s being a virtue, such as it being admirable, or contributing to a successful or meaningful life. These other grounds are not reducible to the eudaimonist claim, Swanton says, although they are easily mistaken for it:

What is the ultimate point depends on *how* the virtue is targeted at the good for, bonds, value, status, and so on, with respect to items in their fields (*my italics*).<sup>686</sup>

The rationale of virtue is the pluralistic demands of the world rather than the ‘perfection of our nature’<sup>687</sup> as in a neo-Aristotelian (eudaimonistic) virtue ethics. Swanton’s PVE, in contrast, provides an anti-foundationalist justification for virtue. The point of the virtues in PVE is *not* to offer a set of base-level values from which an explication of the demands of the world can be derived. Loosening the connection between eudaimonia and virtue, permits a problematisation of virtue itself. This has the result that there is not a list of the virtues that is immutable that one is working from. Rather, the list is always the problematic, to be worked out from situation to situation by the agent. Recognising that there is complexity in the area of the

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<sup>683</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 84.

<sup>684</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 93.

<sup>685</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 93.

<sup>686</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 93.

<sup>687</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 93.

delineation of virtue itself posits virtue as a ‘dynamic process-notion,’ rather than an end state of perfection.<sup>688</sup>

The main point that I wish to make is that in order for virtue to be problematised in the manner Swanton elaborates, the agent is one for whom an inner life is of paramount importance. That is, if virtue is what is problematised, and must be worked out from situation to situation, the agent needs to be able to take on this task since it is the agent who is being called upon to constantly read and re-evaluate each situation. Thus, the question to be asked is: what does the ‘inner’ life of the agent consist of?

Recall that Brown’s ‘for us’ has the aim of instantiating ‘desire’ in the subject beyond the ‘I want’ in terms of liberal self-interest. This orients the subject instead towards the collective. I want to suggest that all three of Swanton’s examples of lives draw out the issue of the embeddedness of the individual in a larger society. Not one of the individuals is a completely independent self for whom recognition and care are not paramount. In the first example, the woman in the jungle is moved in her work by a deep concern for the well-being of others. In the second example, the artist, who believes that she has something to say, is pushed on in her commitment to her art to keep trying to get this appreciated by a wider audience. She does not do art only for herself, but because she believes that she has something to say that others need, or want, to hear. And in the final example, the environmentalist thinks that his environmental message is for the wider good of society (and perhaps for the environment itself?). He comes to be appreciated when his work is recognised (although only after his death). The primary concern and target of engagement in all three is not with the individual, the self, but rather with the ‘other’ and is about the good in the context of a common good and not eudaimonia.

Thus, the two threads that come out of these examples are that the agent is not simply a self, but a ‘self’ that moves in the world enmeshed ‘within a matrix of concentric fields extending from the intra-psycho through the interpersonal to the

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<sup>688</sup> Swanton, ‘Nietzschean Virtue Ethics,’ 187.

larger culture in which we are all immersed.’<sup>689</sup> This is ‘desire’ in the subject that moves beyond the ‘I want’ in terms of liberal self-interest and instead is an orientation of the subject towards the collectively conceived ‘good’ as the aim of that ‘desire.’ This is most clearly illustrated in Swanton’s first example of the aid-worker in the jungle. Her ‘desire’ is to save lives, and as many as possible. In order to do this, she sacrifices even her own life. Her ‘desire’ is for a good larger than herself. What is the limit though? She ends up losing her life. If eudaimonia is not connected to virtue are there now no limits?

The aid worker’s ‘desire’ is one of a universal love that is not constrained and trained by ‘care of the self.’ Given that the agent is embedded in a social matrix, and that virtue is something that is a ‘dynamic process-notion,’ then the agent must possess certain inner resources, all of her own that enable her to articulate a good beyond herself. But a picture of the good that is oriented towards a collective good must also contain and retain within it some conception of ‘care of the self.’

In Swanton, this ‘desire’ in the agent belongs to what she terms the ‘basic modes of moral acknowledgment’ and includes: ‘universal love and its necessary precursors, receptivity and appreciation; self-love; universal respect and self-respect; and creativity.’<sup>690</sup> All of the basic modes of moral acknowledgment feature in all of the virtues. In the next section I look at these basic modes of moral acknowledgment and show how they elaborate the inner life of the self. I address the central notion in identity politics, i.e. ‘desire’ and via Swanton, argue that it is a notion that is comprised of both ‘vision’ and ‘attention.’ As the issue of self-reflection becomes raised, what begins to emerge is a complex picture of the person that provides the basis for a richer approach to the ethical concerns raised in identity politics.

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<sup>689</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 10.

<sup>690</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 99.

## The responsive self

I have argued that identity politics movements are premised on an understanding of the self as inextricably related to ‘the good’ in a way that is potentially and aspirationally transformative and that Brown’s language of ‘I want this for us’<sup>691</sup> is suggestive of moving the agent in this direction. If Brown’s ‘for us’ instantiates the ‘desire’ of the subject as beyond the ‘I want,’ in terms of liberal self-interest, and orients the subject instead towards the collective or a politically conceived ‘good’ as the aim of that ‘desire,’ the ‘I’ must be capable of a certain kind of attention that is oriented towards the ‘us.’ I argue in what follows that this sort of self can be developed by drawing on Swanton’s ‘basic modes of moral acknowledgment,’ which include ‘universal love and its necessary precursors, receptivity and appreciation; self-love; universal respect and self-respect; and creativity.’<sup>692</sup>

## Love and respect

Swanton’s ‘basic modes of moral acknowledgement’ are plural and are present in all of the virtues, serving to integrate the virtues. She draws her account primarily from Kant’s ‘The Doctrine of Virtue,’<sup>693</sup> in which he claims that morality is essentially comprised of two opposing forces, love and respect. Kant claims that love and respect are opposite forces and therefore, pull in opposite directions not dissimilar to attraction and repulsion in physics.<sup>694</sup> Clarifying that she does not mean, nor does she take Kant to mean, that love and respect are opposed to each other, Swanton argues rather that there is an ‘equilibrium’ that the two must meet in order for there

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<sup>691</sup> Brown, *States of Injury*, 75.

<sup>692</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 99.

<sup>693</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, see especially ‘The Doctrine of Virtue.’

<sup>694</sup> Swanton is basing this discussion on the following passage: ‘In speaking of laws of duty (not laws of nature) and, among these, of laws for human beings’ external relations with one another, we consider ourselves in a moral (intelligible) world where, by analogy with the physical world, attraction and repulsion bind together rational beings (on earth). The principle of mutual love admonishes them constantly to come closer to one another; that of the respect they owe one another, to keep themselves at a distance from one another; and should one of these great moral forces fail, ‘then nothingness (immorality), with gaping throat, would drink up the whole kingdom of (moral) beings like a drop of water’ (if I may use Haller’s words, but in a different reference).’ See Kant, ‘The Doctrine of Virtue,’ sect. 24, pp. 198-9

to be stability between them.<sup>695</sup> That is, both forces must be integrated if the moral realm is not to completely fail. Swanton takes this to mean that love and respect must be brought into equilibrium in the agent ‘if they are to constitute aspects of the profiles of all the virtues.’<sup>696</sup>

Love is comprised of universal love and self-love. Rather than thinking of these as separate virtues, possibly coming into conflict with each other and other virtues, Swanton sees Kant as pointing in the direction of seeing them as ‘part of the profile of all virtues.’<sup>697</sup> Thus, all virtues, in order to be virtues, require both forms of love. Together they are what bring the virtues into their proper equilibrium. Love involves forms of coming close, but ‘wise forms of coming close.’<sup>698</sup> The modes of receptivity and appreciation are essential to this ‘wise’ coming close.

Swanton identifies ‘receptivity’ and ‘appreciation’ as part of the modes of moral acknowledgment and as essential for ‘excellence in the coming close of love.’<sup>699</sup>

Drawing on Murdoch’s notion of ‘attention’ and Noddings’ notion of ‘engrossment,’ Swanton shows how Murdoch’s ‘attention’ relates to both wisdom and love and, in the end, how both depend on self-knowledge. Starting with Murdoch’s well-known passage of the mother, M, and daughter-in-law, D, Swanton draws out two important issues:<sup>700</sup> firstly, what the relation between attention and love is and, secondly, whether (loving) ‘attention’ can be distorting and inaccurate to the facts. In other words, Swanton emphasises what the relation between attention and wisdom is.

Recall from Chapter Five that the mother, M, makes a transition from being ill-

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<sup>695</sup> Swanton is rebutting Baron’s scepticism of Kant’s distinction of love and respect, objecting that ‘[l]ove would seem to be opposed to be opposed to hate and also to indifferences, but not to respect.’ Marcia Baron, ‘Love and respect in the ‘Doctrine of Virtue’, *Southern Journal of Philosophy*, Volume 36, suppl. (1997), 29-44.

<sup>696</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 100.

<sup>697</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 100. This is also the way that Marcia Homiak portrays self-love: ‘The virtuous person as a true self-lover, has a kind of positive self-regard and self-confidence: He enjoys himself and his life and does not wish to be different.’ See Marica L. Homiak, ‘Aristotle on the Soul’s Conflicts: Toward an Understanding of Virtue Ethics,’ eds. Andrew Reith, Barbara Herman, and Christine Korsgaard, *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1997), 7-35, at 21.

<sup>698</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 107.

<sup>699</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 110.

<sup>700</sup> See Chapter Five for an extended excerpt.



disposed to her daughter-in-law, D, having initially viewed D with a hostile gaze, and now views her with a loving gaze. Murdoch claims that the mother-in-law is capable of giving ‘just and careful *attention* to an object, which confronts her.’<sup>701</sup> Swanton analyses this notion of ‘attention’ in terms of the idea of receptivity, or ‘engrossment,’ as a form of heightened awareness elaborated by Noddings, which is a ‘pre-analytical’ openness that involves feeling rather than thinking. It also involves an ability to quieten and close out unimportant, background noise that could obscure one’s focus. According to Swanton, it is this awareness, openness, and quietness that are involved in receptivity or ‘engrossment’ that makes a loving attention possible. It is precisely this sort of emotional attitude that allows the positive features of the daughter-in-law to emerge to the mother over and above the negative features. It is also what allows the previously negative features that were in focus to be overlooked, or dismissed. It is this loving gaze that is what ‘motivates caring behaviour.’<sup>702</sup>

Turning to the latter issue, missed by Murdoch’s example, Swanton addresses the important point of whether (loving) attention can be distorting and inaccurate to the facts. Swanton asks why it is that the loving gaze’s account of ‘unpolished’ as ‘refreshingly simple’ should be privileged over the hostile gaze’s account of ‘unpolished’ as ‘vulgar.’<sup>703</sup> Swanton’s reply is that a loving gaze entails ‘practical wisdom.’<sup>704</sup> In Murdoch’s it appears that a further and more careful look at the daughter-in-law is what is necessary to decide what wise attention might amount to. Yet, as Swanton points out, we already have Murdoch’s description of the daughter-in-law – she is ‘unpolished, unrefined, lacking in dignity.’<sup>705</sup> What we require therefore, is not further knowledge (cognitive knowledge), but self-knowledge. Given that the world is ‘chancy and huge,’<sup>706</sup> our perception of it is (necessarily) selective. Because our perception is (necessarily) selective, we should strive to make it at least free of psychological distortions and this task requires work from us and

<sup>701</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 17.

<sup>702</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 112.

<sup>703</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 111.

<sup>704</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 109.

<sup>705</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 112.

<sup>706</sup> Murdoch quoted in Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 113.

work on ourselves.

Since ‘attention’ can become obscured by the psyche, which is prone to ‘self-pity, resentment, fantasy and despair,’<sup>707</sup> although involving Noddings’ pre-analytic receptivity or engrossment, the analytic phase (practical wisdom) can only be entered into with ‘appreciation.’<sup>708</sup> Swanton describes the analytic phase of appreciation through Hume’s standard of taste: ‘It is natural for us to seek a Standard of Taste, a rule, by which the various sentiments of men may be reconciled: at least, a decision, afforded, confirming one sentiment, and condemning another.’<sup>709</sup> It is here though that I think Swanton goes wrong on two counts when she employs Hume’s standard of taste. Firstly, this just does not seem to be what Murdoch is trying to get at in her example of M and D. Secondly, Swanton herself, does not seem to be trying to develop such a standard. I discuss both of these points here since pointing to where Swanton goes wrong, illuminates where she is right.

Firstly, if Hume’s account of appreciation were a correct analysis of Murdoch’s mother’s reflective process, we would either see the mother prefer love over resentment on the basis of an independent standard, or, alternatively, the mother’s emotional transformation could be seen to be made on the basis of an independent standard. Yet, there is no evidence of such a standard anywhere in the example. Neither of these possibilities is apparent in Murdoch’s example. Murdoch does not portray M as comparing one sentiment to another on the basis of any standard. What we do see is that the shift made by M happens internally and on the basis of very careful self-reflection, without reference to an independent standard. The mother appraises herself in relation to D, and although this assessment involves M looking at her own feelings, the form of the appraisal does not proceed as implied by Hume’s remark.

It seems to me that a more accurate understanding of what is happening is that a

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<sup>707</sup> Murdoch quoted in Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 113.

<sup>708</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 112-113.

<sup>709</sup> David Hume, ‘The Standard of Taste,’ *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed., L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. Revised P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 229. Also see Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 114.

progression is being made from one set of feelings to another. The progression is based upon a stringent internal scrutiny that is undertaken by M in relation to, not only herself (M), but to another (D). If we invoke the notion of a standard to try to make sense of what is happening, as Swanton does, what becomes suggested is that M's changed evaluation of her daughter-in-law results in nothing more than an endorsement, or acceptance, of the daughter-in-law's personal style. But this is clearly not what Murdoch's point is. And I do not think that Swanton herself is trying to make this point either. An appreciation of the daughter-in-law is certainly part of what Swanton wants to draw out, but by invoking Hume, Swanton obscures the paramount role of self-reflection in the mother-in-law's transition. Indeed, Murdoch's mother arrives at her conclusions of D after a process of reflection, rather than beginning from a unitary account of value (Hume's standard). And this is Swanton's point here as well. Self-reflection is of paramount importance when, indeed because, value is plural.

Self-knowledge requires self-reflection and both are necessary for bringing about ethical change in the self in relation to the other. As Murdoch's example illustrates so clearly though, self-reflection is not mere introspection. Introspection might yield knowledge of what beliefs, desires, sensations and the like we have. Introspection is, as Kant remarked, merely 'occupying ourselves with spying out the involuntary course of our thoughts and feelings and, so to speak, carefully recording its interior history.'<sup>710</sup> Self-reflection aims at something more than mere knowledge. Self-reflection has the more global aim of understanding the context and significance of particular mental states in terms of the self as a whole. Self-reflection, therefore, is practical and its aim is to yield knowledge that has an effect on how a life is lived and understood. It is because self-reflection is practical in this way that mere knowledge in the sense of an itemisation of mental states is not what is required. Self-reflection is, as Murdoch points out, an activity and one through which we come to know our own ethical quality, recognise value and integrate this knowledge into our lives. And I think this is what Swanton's main point is, but that she obscures by invoking Hume's 'Standard of taste.'

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<sup>710</sup> Emmanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), 14.

Swanton would have done better to draw on her own evocation of Nietzsche here. It is after all, by drawing on Nietzsche that Swanton formulates the argument that virtue is a ‘dynamic process notion.’ How might Swanton have drawn on her own insights into Nietzsche to have delivered a more fruitful critique of M? Instead of invoking Hume’s standard of taste, Nietzsche points in the further direction of self-love as a dynamic activity that enables the agent to distinguish between acceptance as a core of virtue and bad acceptance, which is complacency and self-satisfaction. Nietzschean self-love is activity that requires that the agent think of herself as being worthy of further improvement and discovery. And is this not more accurate as a description of what M is doing? Is she not taking a look at herself and her attitude towards D and seeking to improve herself (in relation to how she views D)? She is dissatisfied with herself in this regard, and so she looks again and seeks to improve herself. She asks herself, how can I be better? How can I do better?

The notion of ‘attention,’ as Swanton has developed it here, allows for a different kind of moral thinking than that of other rule-bound ethics, like Kantianism or utilitarianism. Rather than working from a prior list of values and perhaps, if at all, seeing how self-reflection might contribute to them, what Swanton does, vis-à-vis Murdoch, is to look at how a reflecting self would fill out the idea of choice-worthiness. This is not about arguing for one kind of life over another, but rather to show how it is that reflective activities that raise the question of value contribute to a life along various (plural) dimensions of value.

Living virtuously requires that the agent’s ‘attention’ is directed inward in order to return outward. The self-reflective self is concerned with the state of her self, but in light of values beyond her. Reflection for the sake of reflection, or introspection, has nothing to do with the ethical project. It is one in which the inner life and reflective capacities of the agent play a paramount and critical role. To return to Horney’s ‘neurosis,’ we must acknowledge that we cannot simply decide what to believe or to feel about a matter without permitting in the relevant ‘facts’ (cognitive knowledge) of a situation to guide us. Therefore, self-reflection is not completely independent of

self-knowledge. There are constraints encountered in, and by, the self-reflective self, and these need to be addressed. Murdoch herself writes:

Our states of consciousness differ in quality, our fantasies and reveries are not trivial and unimportant, they are profoundly connected with our energies and our abilities to choose and act.<sup>711</sup>

Swanton's conclusion is that attention as receptivity and appreciation are necessary for virtuous love, but as aspects of wisdom, they do not entail detachment from the work of the self. Accepting receptivity and appreciation as necessary for (good) love does not preclude the coming close analysis of love. Attention, therefore, allows for a different kind of moral thinking from that of the more rule-bound ethics. The constraints encountered in, and by, the self-reflective self, need to be addressed.

Murdoch's example of M and D though is rather innocuous. M seems to be at a safe distance from D, who is living in Australia. The relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is not of the same 'dangerousness' as Reagan's activists.

Swanton's aid worker's dilemmas seem of a more pressing nature and raise questions to do with how it is that the self will be safeguarded from being swallowed up by self-sacrifice.<sup>712</sup> How do we ensure that the other is not swallowed up in invasive compassion? How does the agent guard against a self-sacrificing compassion? In the next section I turn to a look at how Swanton's account deals with the central problem of how to combine 'love' with respect for the self and others as individuals.

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<sup>711</sup> Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, 69.

<sup>712</sup> This parallels the critique in feminist theory of care ethics as being self-sacrificing. MacKinnon is one ardent critic of feminist care ethics as self-sacrificing, when she writes: 'Women value care because men value care according to the care we give them.' See Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Feminism unmodified: discourses on life and law* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987), 39. For a more nuanced look at the care debate in feminism, see Ruth E. Groenhout, 'I Can't Say No: Self-Sacrifice and an Ethics of Care,' eds. Ruth E. Groenhout, Marya Bower, *Philosophy, Feminism and Faith* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2003), 152-174.

Swanton's basic argument is that love is necessary for justice. Love is part of, though not the whole of, the profile of justice. In detailing this argument, Swanton makes the following distinctions between universal love and other ideals such as respect, partialistic love, and universal benevolence:

1. It is a form of coming close;
2. It is particular;
3. It is universal;
4. It is impartial;
5. It is unconditional.<sup>713</sup>

Universal love as particular is 'constrained by the 'fitnesses' of time, place and circumstances, one is to come close to another as an individual, an individual who is fungible with others.'<sup>714</sup> That is, universal love is pervasively context specific and therefore, plural. Universal love is not to be thought of as a love for all of humanity as such. Rather, it is a bond of a particular kind that exists between individual persons. Universal love has its basis in self-love since it is only when the agent refrains from externalising self-contempt in hostility, defensiveness, etc. that she will be able to develop the bond of universal love. Therefore, universal love is premised on, as well as based in, personal work that is transformative. The self-to-self relationship is central to the success of developing the bond of universal love.

According to Swanton, there are three possible views on the impartiality and universality of universal love. Firstly, there is the view that human beings have equal and inherent worth as persons independent of others' responses to them. The impartiality of others' love for them is a response to this equality. Secondly, impartial love is creative in the sense that worth is something that does not exist independently, but is created. The worth that persons have is brought into existence and does not pre-exist its creation. Swanton though moves to defend a third view that claims that impartial love is neither of these foregoing views, but is instead a *bond* of a certain kind, which she terms an 'expressivist view.'<sup>715</sup>

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<sup>713</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 117.

<sup>714</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 119.

<sup>715</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 120-123.

Swanton defines her alternative, expressivist view, as successfully avoiding the issue of searching for some grounding property: 'Love is not resultant on beliefs about value or merit...it is groundless.'<sup>716</sup> That is, it is not to be based on some characteristic, either created or discovered, or otherwise recognised in the beloved. Defining this sort of love as groundless does not mean that it is arbitrary, fortuitous, or incidental. Instead, love is similar in kind to a judgment about what an agent capable of such love is like, as opposed to a judgment of what the beloved is like. Universal love is groundless love and the capacity for this sort of love lies in the capacity of the agent to form bonds of this sort.

If universal love is groundless, how can the agent make a determination of its scope and how can she love (the object) in a suitable way? Unsurprisingly, Swanton again takes a pervasively pluralistic approach to this question. It would be misguided to look for one highly generalizable criterion for moral considerability. A pluralistic approach offers a wide range of virtues within which universal love is contoured – that is, made more specific. Thus, though the agent does not love universally for reasons, the goodness of that universal love is grounded *inter alia* properties of the object of love, such as the nature of the good, value, status, relation to the agent. The goodness and reasonableness of such love lies in the *character* of the agent, as well as in the beloved.

If goodness lies in the character of the agent are there certain features which are, in part, definitive of goodness in the love the agent expresses for someone (or something)? If so, does this not suggest that love is conditional on something? Swanton clarifies that such objections are merely based on a confusion of reasons for love and features which make for goodness in love. In virtuously expressed universal love, although the agent loves persons as ends in themselves (as opposed to means), this does not mean that the agent loves persons *because* they are ends. In order to see persons properly, in the sense that Swanton developed the notion of attention vis-à-vis Murdoch and Noddings, we must make such a distinction in relation to others.

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<sup>716</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 123.

For if we love persons for the reason that they are persons, we end up carrying out an information gathering exercise that yields only cognitive knowledge of other persons: Are they persons? On what basis are they persons? Are they women? Are they white? Are they like me? Are they different? And so on. This leaves the agent in a place insufficient to take on the task of undertaking the personal work she needs to do in regards to herself in *relation* to others.

Universal love, on the other hand, requires that the agent withhold judgment of the other. In this sense, universal love is impartial. That is, the agent refrains from defining the beloved, or object of love on the basis of some property. Instead the agent is open and receptive – she is not judgmental. In this way, universal love is non-judgmental, but it is also unconditional in the sense of coming close.

Understanding universal love as entailing unconditionality should not be confused with self-sacrifice though. Rather, unconditionality points towards understanding universal love as not premised on some particular feature of the beloved. The love rather is based upon the bond between the agent and the beloved. Universal love as an aspect of the profile of the virtues (such as justice, benevolence, patience, etc.) allows that such love will not require the agent to be loving beyond her means. The strength of the love will always be dependent upon situation, the agent's capacity and her strength.

To summarise to this point, Swanton's expressive view points towards answering a relatedly and troubling criticism of virtue ethics, which is that virtue ethics is standardly taken to hold that virtuous behaviour is in some manner easy, natural, or habitual. That is, virtuous behaviour appears to stem from inclination rather than reason. Yet, if we follow Swanton's expressivist view, we can see that spontaneity is involved in virtuous behaviour and virtuousness does not arise out of conformation to what the virtuous agent would do. Rather, it arises out of on-going and committed personal work. Since a pluralistic conception of virtue ethics is open-ended rather than end-product oriented, it is important to look at the place of creativity in it. For, if virtue ethics is open-ended in the sense that the good is not finalisable, but constantly being re-formulated and re-understood, then the good, and the agent in relation to the good, is undergoing and undertaking revision consistently. This



means, in turn, that the agent, herself is constantly being called upon to change and to re-define. I want to suggest that if we understand this change as both Brown (thinking of the ‘I’ in relation to the good of the ‘we’) and Butler (the open-endedness of performativity) do, then, it is a creative activity that it is simultaneously originaive *and* productive. That is, creativity needs to be future-thinking rather than static.

## Creativity

Recall that within identity politics identity, moving about in a context of alterity, must be preserved, but in a manner in which it is open to being transformed, or transformable. Therefore, it is necessary to know how the agent can change, and change *not* in the regressive direction that Brown, via Nietzsche’s *ressentiment*, has argued much identity politics is mired in. Now what needs to be clarified is what mode the ‘desire’ takes once ‘desire’ has been ‘purified.’ I think that the answer lies in the area of Swanton’s notion of creativity, which she classifies as another one of the modes of moral acknowledgment.

Swanton takes her lead from Maslow who argued that creativity is something that is pervasive to all aspects of life.<sup>717</sup> Thus, she views creativity not as a separate virtue, but rather as a mode of moral acknowledgment and thus, similarly placed with love and respect: ‘creativity is an aspect of the profile of all or virtually all of the virtues.’<sup>718</sup> Swanton takes the middle ground in how she defines creativity, arguing that it has both an expressive and an achievement component. As an achievement word, Swanton agrees with Glickman<sup>719</sup> that creativity involves, if not requires, evaluation of its product. This is what differentiates creativity from love and respect and is also what makes it a ‘task word.’<sup>720</sup> Creativity leads to a product or an outcome.

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<sup>717</sup> Abraham Maslow, *Toward a Psychology of Being*, Second Edition (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Co., 1968).

<sup>718</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 161.

<sup>719</sup> Jack Glickman, ‘Creativity in the Arts’, ed. Kars Aargaard-Morgensen, *Culture and Art* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1976), 131-46

<sup>720</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 165.

If creativity is a ‘task word’ with outcomes, it then is necessary to understand what features the product needs to exhibit such that it is to be deemed properly creative or created rather than simply produced or promoted. To recall Butler’s notion of ‘performativity’, the question here is about how creativity can be distinguished from ‘performance.’ Swanton suggests that the features of a creative product fall into three main categories: ‘novelty’, ‘surprise,’ and ‘value.’<sup>721</sup> Swanton dismisses ‘novelty’ on the basis that there are certain constraints that are present in creativity when it is understood within virtue to do with context and bonds. To illustrate this, Swanton takes the example of a work (W), and a conceptual space (C). If someone has produced W having worked within C, then W cannot satisfy the condition of novelty relative to C.<sup>722</sup> That is, an act is not creative unless it *transforms* the conceptual space – there is a condition of novelty. But Swanton maintains that genuinely creative recombinations of available ideas can occur. This is the ‘surprise’ category in which a different relational property of the product of the creative act occurs. That is, ‘the innovation of the product and its unpredictability from the point of view of a given population whose members were acquainted with some of the ideas or objects prior to their recombination.’<sup>723</sup> Creativity thus maintains the ‘I’ and attends to the context of the ‘I’. It would be the ‘lone oracle’ that is capable of ‘novel’ creativity. ‘Surprising’ creativity reflects much closer the embeddedness of the self. Swanton points out that Novitz argues that creativity must have a value component and that in order for a ‘product’ to be creative it must have ‘real value to some people.’<sup>724</sup> Although Swanton views it as a mistake to think of creativity as a product word, she is right to retain this as a value component of creativity as an aspect of the profiles of the virtues. It is creativity that recognises the social embeddedness of the agent and her relation to the good.

What is the point of creativity as a mode of moral acknowledgment? In Nietzsche it is the promotion of value. Its function is to serve that value and thereby, promote the value of the highest cultural ideals. Looking to psychology though, as Swanton does, there appears a different understanding of the point of creativity. Here creativity is

<sup>721</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 165.

<sup>722</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 165

<sup>723</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 165.

<sup>724</sup> Novitz quoted in Swanton *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 166.

expressive of a bond, a bond with self. It is a foremost expression of self-love, and an indication of psychic health.<sup>725</sup> Maslow sees creativity as necessary for healthy human growth and functioning. Unlike Nietzsche, he does not view creativity as a reserve of the few especially talented. Rather, creativity is ‘an aspect of practically any behaviour at all, whether perceptual or attitudinal or emotional, conative, cognitive, or expressive.’<sup>726</sup>

Swanton does not view Maslow’s notion of creativity as being in complete opposition to Nietzsche’s since the latter saw two forms of psychic health as leading to mediocrity. Firstly, the *ressentiment* of the ‘slave type’ externalises self-hate, and secondly, there is the danger of the ‘will-lessness.’ Both sabotage creativity: the first, sabotages creativity in others as well as inhibiting it in one’s self; and the second, by leading a ‘life of adjustment.’<sup>727</sup> Whereas Nietzsche is interested in creativity of the extraordinary individual, Maslow is interested in a more quotidian creativity. Maslow is interested in the health of the ordinary individual, and because of this he claims that ‘we must become more interested in the creative process, the creative attitude, the creative person, rather than in the creative product alone.’<sup>728</sup> Swanton identifies a tension here between creativity as an expression of the flourishing individual and creativity as a societal and cultural goal. According to her, this tension is solved when creativity is taken not as extraordinary, but as ‘standardly quotidian.’<sup>729</sup>

Swanton importantly raises the issue of Nietzsche’s understanding, shared by so many, of the importance of creativity as a product notion. Nietzsche’s ‘philosopher of the future,’ who ‘lives a life of creativity and experimentation, is a free spirit who lives unphilosophically and unwisely, above all imprudently, and bears the burden and duty of a hundred attempts and temptations – he risks himself constantly.’<sup>730</sup> Nietzsche articulates the commonly held notion that there is a connection between imprudence and creativity. But Swanton suggests that despite this connection it is

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<sup>725</sup> Swanton *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 168.

<sup>726</sup> Maslow quoted in Swanton *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 168.

<sup>727</sup> Swanton *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 168.

<sup>728</sup> Maslow quoted in Swanton *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 168.

<sup>729</sup> Swanton *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 168.

<sup>730</sup> Nietzsche quoted in Swanton *Virtue Ethics: a pluralistic view*, 171.

possible to draw on, another, age-old distinction. She invokes to the defence of a ‘standardly quotidian’ notion of creativity, the Aristotelian distinction between ordinary and heroic virtue – heroic virtue is not for everyone. I think this is a useful and legitimate point to make, but one that undermines, or at least does not serve to strengthen Swanton’s argument that creativity is a mode of moral acknowledgment. Within her own system of a pluralistic conception of virtue ethics, in which there has been a loosening of the connection between virtue and flourishing, the agent is called on, from context to context, to define and re-define her self, the good and her relation to the good. There cannot be a list of virtues that can get categorised under ‘heroic virtues.’ I believe that Swanton would have made a stronger case if she had invoked her ‘bonds and attention to context.’ After all, one of the main insights of virtue ethics is that the agent, and thus virtue, are both socially embedded. It seems to me that according to Swanton’s own project, there just are not different classes of virtues, there are only different contexts. Creativity as a mode of moral acknowledgment will feature appropriately in each context *and* in each virtue. Creativity contributes to the delineation of the virtues.

## Conclusion

This chapter has provided an overview of a pluralistic account of virtue ethics. It presented an account of how a non-eudaimonistic virtue ethics elaborates a self that is ‘inextricably’ related to the good, where the notion of the good is not finally definable. It showed how only in non-eudaimonistic virtue ethics in which virtue is not an end state of perfection, allows for virtue, and thus, the practicing of virtues, to be construed as a ‘dynamic process-notion.’<sup>731</sup> A number of ethical concepts - such as love, respect, and creativity– contribute to enriching the picture of the inner life of the self. I showed how PVE addresses the central notion of ‘desire’ as comprised of both ‘vision’ and ‘attention’ in order to elaborate a picture of the self with the full resources of an inner life. A complex picture of the person emerges that provides the basis for a richer approach to the ethical concerns raised in identity politics.

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<sup>731</sup> Christine Swanton, ‘Nietzschean Virtue Ethics,’ 192.

Questions remain regarding the possibility of applying this work to the problematic of the feminist identity politics debate. How does it contribute to the problem of combining collective politics and diversity? Does it help us to conceptualise feminist collectivity in a way that does not exclude diversity and yet, does not *require* unity? I do not have scope in the present project to answer all of these questions fully, but in the next chapter I try to offer a very rough and preliminary sketch of how the normative vocabulary provided by Swanton's PVE might begin to.

## Practically speaking: applying pluralistic virtue ethics

### Introduction

The previous chapter offered a picture of the agent that a pluralistic conception of virtue ethics offers and showed how this account is distinctive. The aim of this chapter is to consider how such an agent might be expected to function in an on-the-ground case. That is, how can we expect the PVE agent to act when it comes to a real life situation in which problem-solving is involved? What does a PVE explanation add or take away from explaining how agents function in situations of difference and conflict? From where does the pluralistic virtue ethical agent derive her virtue knowledge? What can we expect her aims to be in problem-solving situations? What might be the virtues of practice she exercises? In order to address these questions, I begin to draw together the threads of my argument by offering a very preliminary suggestion of what the pluralistic virtue ethical self might look like in a particularised context.

This chapter returns to the issues raised in Chapter Two concerning a conception of the individual in the context of collective political action. There I argued that collective political work requires individuals to constantly engage in ever-changing and intensely inclusive cooperative work across difference and that this entails ongoing self-transformation. The work of collective politics depends upon a notion of a self that can cultivate flexibility with respect to an individual's own self-understandings. It also requires that the self cultivate a receptivity to different others, who may be unappealing and sometimes threatening. Therefore, what is required of the self is tolerance for ambiguity and change. The dispositions necessary for this sort of work cannot be assumed as natural, for they are dispositions that require cultivation. This leads me back to the initial questions I raised, but now in light of PVE: What sort of *participant* is the PVE self? How does the PVE self take up a

non-reductive relation to the other? How is it that the PVE self allows, indeed, aims, at transformation of the self within the context of collective political action?

My argument throughout this chapter is that a PVE account of the self is diagnostic as well as normative. That is, I propose that the self that is at the heart of a pluralistic virtue ethical account is one that we can indeed see at work when we look at cases of practical collective political work. At the same time, it illuminates the problem of combining collective politics and diversity and provides guidance.

Throughout the thesis I have engaged with the issue of the self in identity politics from a mainly philosophical perspective. Theorizing about ethical agents requires bridging theory with practice, an issue critical for feminism and particularly to the re-thinking of collective political action. It is for this reason that in this chapter I move to sketch out how we might operationalize PVE. I move beyond a discussion of PVE's philosophical concepts to show how some of its key concepts can be used to analyse political and social cooperation amidst diversity and conflict in the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition (NIWC). In particular, I return to look in much more detail at the case of Róisín McAliskey, which was briefly discussed in Chapter Two. Throughout this thesis I have built the argument that one of the most central issues for feminism is how to deal with difference/diversity. The NIWC provides a notable case to look at for how it did not seek to avoid differences/diversity, but to the contrary, centred difference and conflict. Indeed, central to its organising principles indeed was how to combine difference and conflict with collective politics. The McAliskey case is especially significant for how it tested whether or not a coalition of women from divisive national and political backgrounds could respond to an issue so important to both unionists and nationalists. My main interest here is not what the outcome of the response was, but how the Coalition went about the task of working out how to respond.

The first section of this chapter provides a brief background of the Northern Ireland context and the place of the NIWC in it.<sup>732</sup> The second section gives a more detailed

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<sup>732</sup> I do not repeat the detail from Chapter Two. Please refer to pages 49 – 52 for a more detailed account.

account of the Roisin McAliskey case than was presented in Chapter Two. Since the literature in feminist theory frames the case of the NIWC within the methodology of transversal politics,<sup>733</sup> in the third section, I discuss how this approach understands this particular case. In the final section, I outline the framework that a pluralistic virtue ethical account offers. I argue here that a PVE framework fills in some of the gaps left by a 'transversal' approach. Importantly, a PVE can be drawn on to outline the attitudes and dispositions that diverse groups of women, working across difference, cultivate to establish non-repressive affirmative political connections.

## **Background: identity, difference and political organising in Northern Ireland**

Northern Ireland remains, despite movements towards a devolved government, a divided nation. Conflict is largely defined as a struggle between two rival groups – Protestant and Catholic. The divisiveness between the two is played out in physical violence, sectarian prejudices and contested notions of citizenship, belonging and the definition of the nation-state. The participation of women in formal politics is statistically and comparatively low.<sup>734</sup> In community activism though, women have initiated cross-country alliances that transgress divisive religious and cultural boundaries. Most analyses of the women's movement in Northern Ireland address women's participation in formal politics and the impact community activism has had

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<sup>733</sup> See for instance Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (Zed Books: London and New York, 1998); Cera Murtagh, 'A Transient Transition: The Cultural and institutional Obstacles Impeding the Northern Ireland Women's Coalition in its Progress from Informal to Formal Politics,' *Irish Political Studies*, Volume 23, Issue 1 (February 2008), 21-40; Ruth Lister, 'Towards a Feminist Synthesis,' *Feminist Review*, Number 57 (1997), 28-48; Mary K. Meyer, 'Gender Politics in Northern Ireland Peace Process'; Elisabeth Porter, 'Identity, Location, Plurality: Women, Nationalism in Northern Ireland,' Rick Wilford and Robert L. Miller, eds., *Women, Ethnicity and Nationalism: The Politics of Transition* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>734</sup> Of the United Kingdom's four devolved regions, North Ireland is consistently rooted at the bottom of the gender league table. In the current regional Assembly, women hold only 18.5% of the seats. Four Assembly elections have only seen a total of 69 women elected – just 16% of the total of MLA's overall. In the 2010 general elections women occupied four of the eighteen Westminster seats. At the European Parliamentary level women have also struggled for representation, making up just 16.7% of MEPs between 1984 and 2009. See Neil Mathews, 'Gendered Candidate Selection and the Representation of Women in Northern Ireland,' *Parliamentary Affairs* (2012) 1-30.



on the participation of women in that arena.<sup>735</sup> In what follows, I concentrate instead on the relationship between identity and difference and how this plays out in the internal workings of the women's movement and in particular, the NIWC.

In Northern Ireland, identity functions in such a way as to polarize differences. There, one can only ever occupy an identity position that is either Irish, Catholic, republican, nationalist; *or* British, Protestant, loyalist, unionist. The city of Belfast offers an illustrative example of this. Most of the city is ethnically segregated, embodying a quotidian apartheid. Of its 51 administrative wards, 27 have more than either 95 percent Protestants or 95 percent Catholics. Long high fences – 'peace lines' – have been erected between the conflict-prone areas.<sup>736</sup> Identities are reinforced by a denial of difference as territorial and ethnic boundaries work to exclude outsiders and contain insiders. Belfast, in its division into two neat communities – one Protestant and the other Catholic – treats each one as a natural organic whole within whose boundaries individuals share a sense of belonging and a commitment to shared interests, positions and goals. This 'cosy inclusiveness' though also serves to generate 'borders, dichotomies, and exclusions,' which bar those who are not the same and, in the name of homogeneity, repress any differences that do exist.<sup>737</sup>

Segregation and suppression of difference fosters mutual ignorance. Consider the Catholic civil servant who, when asked whether his Protestant colleagues lacked insight into local life answered: 'With some of them their ignorance is total, absolute and complete. You have people determining housing policy who have never been on the Shankill Road or the Falls Road.'<sup>738</sup> Cockburn notes that in these roads the locals are not only strangers to each other, but to themselves as well. Cockburn recounts

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<sup>735</sup> See for instance Begona Aretxaga, *Shattering Silence: Women, Nationalism, and Political Subjectivity* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Carmel Roulston, 'Women on the Margin: The Women's Movements in Northern Ireland, 1973-1995'; Rosemary Sales, *Women divided: gender, religion and politics in Northern Ireland* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Carmel Roulston and Celia Davies, *Women, Gender and Democracy in Northern Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave ;New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000)

<sup>736</sup> Cynthia Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict* (London and New York: Zed Books, 1998), 46.

<sup>737</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'The ideal of community and the politics of difference,' Linda J. Nicholson (ed.) *Feminism/Postmodernism* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 301.

<sup>738</sup> Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, 47.

how a social worker told her that she takes women in mixed (Catholic and Protestant) groups to a café for something to eat, first on one side of the line and then on the other, to teach ‘them that the food in the Falls is every bit as tasty as in the Shankill.’<sup>739</sup> Their ignorance does not end at what the other eats. It extends to knowledge of themselves. Cockburn again recounts what a youth worker told her of the Protestant youngsters she works with: ‘They see themselves as British. Yet you ask them why they’re British, they’ve no idea. Ask them what they like about being British, they’ve no idea. Ask them what they’re frightened of, what would happen if we had a united Ireland. They don’t know.’<sup>740</sup>

The ceasefires in Northern Ireland, although offering new opportunities for dialogue, have not eased ethnic, religious and political conflict. Because of this, ‘other cleavages, inequalities, and identities are accorded low priority.’<sup>741</sup> Not only do constitutional concerns take precedence, but as Roulston notes, most women also share the same divisive community preoccupations. It is precisely because of this that feminism cannot disregard these other identity positions: ‘Northern Irish women will have to be qualified feminists, fighting for space within and against their communities.’<sup>742</sup>

In a context of ethnic and religious divisiveness, what are the possibilities for undertaking collective political action across differences and inequalities? Feminist diversity and postmodern accounts of identity like those discussed in Chapter Two, problematize the notion of a unified, essentialised female identity. They view the idea as not only impossible, but undesirable as a goal, or premise, for feminist collective politics. Instead, they identify the complex, overlapping, shifting and conflicting intersubjective relations as what might form and transform difference/identity. Feminists studying Northern Ireland have indeed documented this sort of multi-faceted identity.<sup>743</sup> Porter, for example, argues that it is impossible

<sup>739</sup> Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, 47.

<sup>740</sup> Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, 47.

<sup>741</sup> Roulston, ‘Women on the Margin: The Women’s Movements in Northern Ireland, 1973-1995,’ 56.

<sup>742</sup> Roulston, ‘Women on the Margin: The Women’s Movements in Northern Ireland, 1973-1995,’ 57.

<sup>743</sup> See for instance Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*; Roulston, ‘Women on the Margin: The Women’s Movements in Northern Ireland, 1973-1995;’ Porter, ‘Risks and Responsibilities: Creating Dialogical Spaces in Northern Ireland.’

to speak of ‘woman’ as an ‘essential homogenization’ in the Northern Irish context.<sup>744</sup>

Attending to identity in ways that are, to recall Lloyd’s term, ‘constative’ in situations of radical alterity is not necessarily emancipative, but can serve to justify political closure in a manner similar to Brown’s ‘politicised identities.’ In Northern Ireland, loyalist women *as* ‘women’ have caused massive civil disruptions, violence and sometimes death as they have organised roadblocks in protest of the controversial right to march down nationalist roads. Republican women *as* women have been active in violent resistance to British rule. In Northern Ireland, as Porter observes, one’s specific location is what defines one’s identity – individually, communally and nationally.<sup>745</sup>

When allegiances predominate, identity politics carries with it the risk of leading only to mutual ignorance and distrust. Any possibility of forming alliances across difference is foreclosed from the start. This is the observation that has been made by many studying the North Ireland women’s movement. The nationalist identities of Unionism and Irish republicanism have served as a barrier to the development of a unified women’s movement in Northern Ireland.<sup>746</sup> The opportunities for taking the dangerous risks of coalition work, as Reagon has elaborated, are seldom available. Foreclosed also is the space necessary for the opportunity to cultivate Foucault’s attitudes of ‘refusal, curiosity and innovation.’<sup>747</sup>

Yet, despite the divisive conflict engendered by divided and mutually distrustful identity positions, solidarity and alliances have emerged between women in Northern Ireland. These alliances did not emerge apolitically, but rather through practices aimed at recognising difference.<sup>748</sup> The Belfast’s Women’s Support Network, for instance, came together, not out of friendship, but ‘because a common goal or common cause was stronger than the fear of personal risk involved in moving out of

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<sup>744</sup> Porter, ‘Risks and Responsibilities: Creating Dialogical Spaces in Northern Ireland,’ 165.

<sup>745</sup> Porter, ‘Risks and Responsibilities: Creating Dialogical Spaces in Northern Ireland,’ 164.

<sup>746</sup> Roulston, ‘Women on the Margin: The Women’s Movements in Northern Ireland, 1973-1995.’

<sup>747</sup> See Chapter Six page 110.

<sup>748</sup> Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*.

safe familiar territory and across onto enemy terrain.’<sup>749</sup> Forging alliances in zones of conflict, where political changes occur daily and participating in political projects with different others puts one at personal risk, is a risky and exhausting activity.

If articulating identity politics through the language of ‘I am’ serves to fragment and obstruct the possibilities of solidarity, how successful are alliances that aim to shift that articulation to an ‘I want’? How successful are groups that have come together in order to achieve a particular goal? While alliances formed between some unionist and nationalist women’s groups have enjoyed varying degrees of success in achieving some socio-economic goals, the formation of the NIWC in 1996 provides a notable model of women organising across identity differences in a fractured polity.

Monica McWilliams, a member of the Coalition, describes the politics practiced by the NIWC as intentionally transversalist and based principally on the notions of ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting,’ which she defines as ‘being rooted in one’s own identity, but moving to appreciate another’s position.’<sup>750</sup> According to McWilliams, the NIWC understood transversalism as ‘a process of dialogue across difference, a respect for differences,’ which leads to ‘a different kind of coalition politics’ in which participants ‘respect rather than bury their differences.’<sup>751</sup> As discussed already in Chapter Two, transversalism rejects universalism and its assumption of unity and homogeneity. It rejects relativism and its assumption that there is no basis for a common understanding. Difference and conflict serve as starting points.

The case of Róisín McAliskey and the deliberations that transpired within the NIWC in regards to this case, show how transversalist politics were operationalised. In assessing the case, I raise the following questions: how does transversalism explain this case? Are there limits to ‘rooting’ and ‘shifting’? Is it missing something? Can transversalism explain the shift that the agent must make in order to heed the

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<sup>749</sup> Cockburn, *The Space Between Us: Negotiating Gender and National Identities in Conflict*, 80.

<sup>750</sup> Monica McWilliams quoted in Meyer, ‘Gender Politics and the Northern Ireland Peace Process,’ 184.

<sup>751</sup> Meyer, ‘Gender Politics and the Northern Ireland Peace Process,’ 185.

‘message’ rather than the ‘messenger’? Do the terms of a transversal approach obscure anything crucial?

## The case of Róisín McAliskey

Róisín McAliskey, daughter of the republican civil rights activist and former MP for Mid-Ulster, Bernadette Devlin (later McAliskey), was arrested in her home by the Royal Ulster Constabulary on 20 November 1996 on suspicion of her involvement in an IRA attack on a British army barracks in Germany. She was detained and interrogated for six days under emergency anti-terrorism laws. Following her arrest, McAliskey maintained that she was interrogated for five days without legal counsel and without being informed of the charges against her. On 27 November 1996 she was remanded to London pending extradition to Germany. Shortly after this she was transferred to the all-male Belmarsh prison. In response to Amnesty International, as well as growing international protest, McAliskey was eventually transferred back to London’s women’s prison, Holloway.

Upon her arrest, McAliskey was classified as a Category A high risk prisoner.<sup>752</sup> This categorization meant that she was subject to solitary confinement, regular evening and morning strip searches as well as after ‘closed’ visits (i.e. visits with no physical contact). She was also subject to the added security measure of her cell light being turned on every hour throughout the night. Furthermore, her prisoner category also meant that she was excluded from prison communal exercise facilities.

McAliskey was four months pregnant when she was originally arrested. She was asthmatic, prone to panic attacks and, due to an eating disorder, was severely underweight. She was fearful that she would be separated from her baby at birth and was told she may be manacled during the labour. Amnesty International protested that, not only had McAliskey been detained without charge, but the prison in which

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<sup>752</sup> On remand for serious offences, prisoners can be categorised as Category A if they are considered to be highly dangerous to the public, police, or the security of the state. Category A prisoners are further subdivided into three further categories: standard risk, high risk, or exceptional risk. See Amnesty International, *United Kingdom: Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment: Detention of Róisín McAliskey* (1997).

she was detained did not provide adequate facilities for holding a Category A prisoner. Amnesty International denounced the conditions in which she was being imprisoned as ‘cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.’<sup>753</sup> Yet, despite McAliskey’s deteriorating physical and mental conditions, it took several months of mounting political pressure for the authorities to move to downgrade her status so that she could access the prison’s mother and baby unit.

In May 1997, McAliskey was released on conditional bail just days before giving birth. She then spent the ensuing year in a psychiatric hospital, reportedly suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and a severe form of post-natal depression. In the end McAliskey was never formally charged with any offence. In January 1998 she was cleared for extradition, but in March of the same year, the British Home Secretary announced that, on the basis of her medical condition, she would not be extradited.

### **NIWC’s transversalist approach to the McAliskey case**

When the McAliskey case became public, the challenge for the NIWC was to come to a position that would be acceptable to all of its members – unionist, nationalist, etc. – and one that could be publicly articulated within Coalition terms. Since the NIWC was not a homogeneous group, it could not assume unification and so, undertook discussions of the McAliskey case in an open forum.

The NIWC began developing its position through an exchange of views at general meetings as well as in smaller teams, using as its framework the principles of transversalist politics. In these open meetings, participants intentionally confronted differing perspectives as women from diverse backgrounds all presented their perceptions. What was clear from the very beginning was that the identity that NIWC women shared by virtue of being ‘women’ would not be enough to come to a position on the case. Máire, a participant in some of the meetings, puts it so:

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<sup>753</sup> Amnesty International, *United Kingdom: Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment: Detention of Roisin McAliskey* (1997).

I am very conscious now when I'm looking to lobby on behalf of Róisín McAliskey's rights as a woman, as a citizen, as a human being, that there are many sister organisations [in the women's movement] that I know that I couldn't approach....When a situation comes up where a woman is in prison, she's five months pregnant, and you feel that suddenly this has to be avoided, this is something that we can't talk about: it really makes me question the validity of doing that [broad-based work].<sup>754</sup>

Any recourse to some sort of self-evident demands based on a universal sisterhood were unsettled for Máire by her observation that when the woman needing support was marked in advance by an identity – in this case, republicanism – she was outside the boundaries demarcated by 'sisterhood.' Therefore, the shared identity of 'woman' could not serve as sufficient basis for forging and maintaining unity within the NIWC – something else would have to.

What became clear from the beginning as the NIWC first worked out internally what their stance publicly would be on this case, was that hard work by individual women was required. In the open discussion forums, participants tried to persuade others and at times were called upon to adjust their views. Although arguments could be intense in these open forums, it was never about winning or losing. Rather, the aim was to find a position that could take into account deeply rooted loyalties and identities, whilst at the same time articulating the coalition's founding principles of 'equality, inclusion and respect.'<sup>755</sup> These terms were far from self-evident. They hardly served to allow an internally diverse group to sidestep having to confront their differences as is evidenced by a report written up by two participants to the discussions:

Aspects of her [McAliskey's] case were discussed by the Women's Coalition over several weeks. A range of issues were highlighted including the rights of the child, rights of prisoners, the treatment of women prisoners and the *difficulties* which arise when there is any debate about human rights in Northern Ireland (my italics).<sup>756</sup>

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<sup>754</sup> Whitaker, 'Gender and the Politics of Justice in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Considering Roisin McAliskey,' 10.

<sup>755</sup> Whitaker, 'Gender and the Politics of Justice in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Considering Roisin McAliskey,' 13.

<sup>756</sup> Jane Wilde and Barbara McCabe, 'High Risk,' *Fortnight*, Number 360 (April 1997), 12.

The ‘difficulties’ to which Wilde and McCabe refer are the manner in which in Northern Ireland, human rights ‘are traditionally seen as the domain of the nationalist or catholic community, especially when they relate to the issues of justice.’<sup>757</sup> And, as might be expected from this historical legacy, Protestant and unionist members of the NIWC were wary that their support for McAliskey would be interpreted as support of a wider republican agenda.

The ability of those members committed to principles of human rights, but still conflicted, benefitted from the contributions of other Protestant members. These members actively challenged the sectarian framework in which the McAliskey case was articulated as is captured in this quote of one such member:

Some of the other Protestant members...immediately began talking about [Róisín’s] mother...and what she was likely to be involved in. I took the view that it was important to say what I had to say, specifically because I was Protestant, and that I was specifically talking to other Protestants in the Coalition...That was the way that I approached the discussions and debates...A lot of the reaction that people had was: the [McAliskey] name. So it was really about saying, ‘Well, forget the name. What about this situation for anybody?’ And then, you know, it was a very good example of going back to our basic principles and looking at the case through those and inevitably ending up at a particular position, because that was the only position you could have ended up - which was to support her case.<sup>758</sup>

This member’s comments illustrate how hard it is to separate notions of justice from ethnic and political identity positions. This is both because some women did tend to come to the case having already pre-judged it based on McAliskey’s identity (‘Róisín’s story began before she was born’), and because the lives of the participants are framed by the sectarian landscape. The member quoted above, herself suggests that the discussions were ‘really about’ forgetting the ‘name.’ But can we really ‘forget the name’? Is it helpful to ‘forget’? Can forgetting lead to the transformative work that is necessary for individuals to work together across and because of diversity? Sagar, the Protestant activist who was nominated as one of

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<sup>757</sup> Wilde and McCabe, ‘High Risk,’ 13.

<sup>758</sup> Whitaker, ‘Gender and the Politics of Justice in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Considering Róisín McAliskey,’ 14.



NIWC's representatives to the peace talks, offers an account of her experience as a participant in the NIWC discussions about the McAliskey case which is particularly illuminating in this regard.

Sagar recounts how she initially found it *personally* very difficult to think about Róisín McAliskey separate from her mother. McAliskey's mother was the civil rights activist and MP, Bernadette Devlin McAliskey. For Sagar, herself a Protestant activist, Devlin represented 'painful' and 'bitter' memories and conjured up feelings of 'fear' and 'bigotry' in herself.<sup>759</sup> Sagar tells how she was able to recognise that in order to think about the Róisín case, she would have to face her *own* fears and bigotry. It was through the open discussions with other group members that Sagar maintains she was able to come to view the case as being about equality and human rights, specifically prisoner's rights. It was by focusing on commonly held values, according to Sagar, that she was able to agree that the McAliskey case represented an injustice. How is this journey explained within the terms of transversalism?

### **The limits of transversal politics**

Transversalism places critical importance on dialogue and this is reflected in the process that the NIWC undertook in working out their stance on the McAliskey case. In transversalism, the dialogical process is elaborated through the notions of 'rooting' and 'shifting.' Sagar approaches the McAliskey case from her 'rooted' position as a Protestant working class activist. According to transversalism, this position should not be given up. Sagar should stay true to her roots and her values. But staying 'rooted' should not involve a homogenisation of the 'other.' Instead, one should work to recognise differences. But this is not what Sagar appears to have done. She never both stays 'rooted' and 'shifts.' For Sagar, it is in trying to shift that she identifies the precise locus of her own injury. Why, when she looks at the issue of McAliskey does she feel fear, pain and hurt? The precise locus of injury for Sagar is the identity of McAliskey's mother and what she this represents to Sagar in her 'rooted' position.

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<sup>759</sup> Pearl Sagar's account is re-told by Meyer. See Mary K. Meyer, 'Gender Politics in the Northern Ireland Peace Process.'

At first, Sagar is unable to separate this information from McAliskey. Sagar appears unable to think of McAliskey as anything other than Bernadette's daughter. She is unable to think of her as 'a woman' separate from her national identity. Indeed, Sagar was not alone in this view. Many republican feminists were critical of decoupling support for McAliskey 'as a woman' from her national identity. One such feminist questioned this tactic:

Can you support somebody for part of themselves? I suppose Róisín herself, her body, became the locus of all those different debates about: is it because she's a woman, because she's a republican? – 'I'll support her because she's a woman and because she's pregnant but not because she's a republican,' you know – as if all those things can be pulled apart.<sup>760</sup>

That Sagar, along with others, are unable to 'forget' McAliskey's republican identity, serves as reminder of the limits of cognitive knowledge. In fact, her account suggests that it is not possible to 'forget the name,' but only to transform one's relation to the 'name.' In order to do this, it is first necessary to grapple with how difficult it is to decouple notions of justice from the self-referential logic of our identity positions that may make 'shifting' difficult. Her account points to the possibility that the task is not to 'forget,' but to rather to 'refuse' who we are in relation to the name.

Although Sagar focusses more on how she had to view the McAliskey case as being about equality and human rights in order to get to a point where she could support the NIWC supporting the case, she begins the account of her journey to this outcome from the very individual and personal stance of how she found it difficult to think about the case because of the fear and pain she felt in regards to McAliskey's mother. Sagar does not suggest that for her it is a matter of forgetting 'the name.' Instead, Sagar maintains that it was only through a recognition of the painful memories conjured up by McAliskey's identity (as the daughter of Bernadette) that

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<sup>760</sup> Maire quoted in Whitaker, 'Gender and the Politics of Justice in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Considering Róisín McAliskey,' 15.

she begins to undertake the personal and inner work that is necessary to get to the point that she can view the case as being about equality and human rights.

Transversalism accentuates communicative engagement and places an emphasis on the sharing of perspectives. It overemphasises the promise of cognitive knowledge. But where are we after we have undertaken the fact-finding mission and are left with ‘fear’ and ‘hurt’? How is it that Sagar was able to shift from her ‘pain’ and ‘fear’ so that she could embrace a common project of equality and human rights?

Exactly how Sagar makes the shift from being caught up in the hurt of who McAliskey is, to supporting her on the basis of the universal standards of equality and human rights is not clearly enunciated. How does Sagar move beyond her self-needs/interests to articulate the communal and societal needs of social justice? I suggest that Sagar must first deal with the pain and hurt of what McAliskey’s mother represents, which can be placed in Brown’s logic of *ressentiment* and the question of ‘who am I?’ In order to shift this logic of self-interest towards the communal issues of equality and human rights, which is ‘what do I want for us?’, Sagar must undertake the work of self-reflection. According to a transversal approach, staying ‘rooted’ means something akin to what McWilliams has to say:

I don’t think I would have ever shed my nationalism. I have fairly strong beliefs, and I believe in my identity, and I am very proud of my identity. But I don’t need to superimpose it on someone else’s identity. I could never be supportive of someone who denies me that identity, or alternatively wants to silence someone else’s identity in order to have their own recognized.<sup>761</sup>

By remaining ‘rooted,’ Sagar experiences hurt and fear in her relationship to McAliskey. Transversalism holds that it is necessary to both ‘root’ and ‘shift,’ so, how does Sagar ‘shift’? Recall that ‘shifting’ in transversalism is a matter of putting oneself in the situation of those with whom one is in dialogue and from whom one is also different. This would seem to offer only an explanation for the dialogical process that Sagar engages with in relation to other members of the NIWC. But

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<sup>761</sup> Monica McWilliams, interview in Irish Times, March 30, 1998 (<http://quis.qub.ac.uk/qubcu/ni/nicom12.htm>) .

recall that Sagar *begins* by indicating that for her the work began first as a matter of self-reflection. She begins by saying that she realised that she would have to confront her own fears and her own bigotry about Devlin in order to even think about McAliskey. I want to suggest that this sounds very similar to Swanton's development of Murdoch's example of M and D. In the next section I explore how we can read Sagar's account through this framework and in so doing demonstrate how Swanton's PVE might be operationalised.

## **A pluralistic virtue ethics account of the McAliskey case**

How can we understand how Sagar progresses from one set of feelings – 'hurt,' 'pain,' 'fear' and 'bigotry' – to another? My assertion is that she does have to progress from these feelings in order to arrive at her final point, which was to exercise the ethical principles of equality and human rights. Sagar frames her feelings as 'personal.' They are something that are hers. The progression that happens is based on an internal scrutiny that is undertaken by Sagar in relation to, not only herself, but to Bernadette Devlin. When Sagar invokes the notion of a standard – 'equality' and 'human rights' – to try to understand what is happening, all that is suggested is that Sagar has been able to 'forget the name' Devlin. I do not want to suggest that such standards are not important, or not necessary. What I do want to suggest though is that something important does end up getting missed, or obscured, in our understanding of what is happening by invoking the standard as explanation.

What is obscured by focussing on the standard is the central role of self-reflection that was necessary *before* Sagar could arrive at a point where she could make the shift to focus on the standard of 'equality' and 'human rights.' Indeed, is this not exactly what we see when Sagar recounts how she had to confront her own 'fear' and 'bigotry' before she come to the realisation that this case was about 'human rights' and specifically, 'prisoner rights, and had anyone else been in Róisín's place, who her mother was would not have mattered'<sup>762</sup>? Sagar appears to have arrived at

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<sup>762</sup> Meyer, 'Gender Politics in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: A Case Study of the Transversal Politics of Northern Ireland Women's Coalition,' 186.

her conclusions about McAliskey, separate from her mother, only after a process of reflection. Sagar's starting point is not that of a unitary account of value. Does Sagar not look at herself and her attitude towards Devlin and then McAliskey and seek to improve herself? Surely, the language she invokes – 'my own bigotry' – suggests just this. Do we not all feel shame when we look inside and find our own feelings of 'bigotry', 'hurt' and 'fear'? Dissatisfied with herself, does she look again? Dissatisfied that she cannot see McAliskey except as the daughter of Devlin, does she not indicate that this is not good enough? Does she not ask herself – how can I do better?

These are not questions that are about one sort of life or another. These are questions that have to do with value. The profoundly personal aspect of self-reflection offers insight into the most acute needs of any particular situation. A pluralistic conception of virtue ethics draws on and relates such knowledge to cognitive human interests and communicative action. This relation results in the dismantling of the barrier between knowledge and value. In PVE all knowledge has an ethical component and thus, is related in some way to action (*praxis*) whether communicative or reflective. This suggests that all learning has a value component. That is, since knowledge is *not* value neutral, all learning entails an encounter with knowledge *as* value. Self-reflection offers the means by which the value of any knowledge is made explicit to the agent. A transversal approach appears to give focus only to the act of communication. There is no explanation that is offered of what internal work was undertaken by Sagar in order to be able to shift from the starting point (that McAliskey's mother was Bernadette and the hurt this caused for Sagar) to Sagar's subsequent position of taking a stand on behalf of McAliskey on the basis of equality. Drawing on the PVE framework provides clues to these inner processes and clarifies the inner picture.

Transversal politics does not assume that the agent has all the information she needs. Getting to the 'truth' demands open communication with others. Swanton argues via Nietzsche that because the agent is prone to 'ignorance, cultural embeddedness and

role demands,<sup>763</sup> it is necessary not only to see others (in the sense that Murdoch develops ‘unselfing’), but that it is also necessary to integrate the self’s own perspectives. Sagar brought to the open discussions within the NIWC both her own identity as a Protestant working class community activist and her commitment to the universal principles of equality and human rights. How did she integrate these perspectives? How does the individual go about integrating her own perspectives with those of others? The hard work in doing this is captured in the following quote from, Susan, another NIWC member from a Protestant background:

There was a point when stuff came in and I looked and it was so clearly propaganda.....[We had been] asking for improvement in] the conditions she was kept in, and we wanted to see their policies on women in the prison around health care....[But] I [thought], ‘This woman has now become Sinn Féin’s latest pinup, and I can’t listen to this stuff any more.’ And I said that at a meeting and the horns came out, and I felt isolated....<sup>764</sup>

I offer this quote to reinforce the argument that I made in Chapter Two - that coalitions place the self in an ethical situation. That is, the agent is in a concrete relation to others with whom she is working towards a concrete goal. Susan, like Sagar, is in a relation to those other members in the NIWC working towards the goal of coming to a position on the McAliskey case. This practical ethics, remember, ‘takes its start from a plight’ - the plight that each of us is epistemically limited. Transversal politics works to lessen this. Susan, in the open discussions of the NIWC shared her perspective, but to share our perspective carries a risk – Susan found that ‘the horns came out.’ She was hurt when she discovered that several women were behind attacks that were voiced. Therefore, to say that each of us is epistemically limited is not only what our plight is about. PVE highlights the need there is to integrate perspectives not just as an epistemological need, but as a social need. Problems in the world must be solved in ways we can live with.

It is only through an integration of perspectives that a less limited response to the world is possible. It is in this sense – the task of integrating perspectives – that PVE

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<sup>763</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 250.

<sup>764</sup> Whitaker, ‘Gender and the Politics of Justice in the Northern Ireland Peace Process: Considering Roisin McAliskey,’ 16.

is profoundly practical. How to go about ‘integrating perspectives,’ remains unelaborated in ‘transversalism.’ We find ourselves perplexed when we try to understand what exactly has shifted for Sagar so that she now can access and be motivated by the universal notions of equality and human rights.

## Problem solving

Swanton describes ‘virtues of practice’<sup>765</sup> as ‘a dynamic process of feedback, learning and modification’ and groups them into three main categories. The first she specifies as the ‘virtues of focus’:

An attempt to solve a problem requires that the participants have the disposition and ability to establish and maintain a shared focus. A shared focus suggests the nature of the information likely to be relevant, motivates the involvement of the parties, and provides a context for the operation of dialogical virtues involved in disclosure, testing and facilitation. While such a focus is frequently established (and maintained) implicitly, more explicit moves may be required when the topic is difficult. ... Where this is required, the virtues of focus require not just acumen, discipline, sensitivity, and wisdom, but also may require courage and persistence. There is a need, then, for virtues designed to overcome the numerous obstacles to an adequate and shared understanding....<sup>766</sup>

The second group of the virtues of practice are ‘the imaginative and analytic virtues’ that are required to facilitate constraint integration.<sup>767</sup> These include insight and depth of understanding, creativity and a commitment to so-called ‘valid information.’ Whereas, Yuval-Davis places emphasis on the ‘message’ as opposed to the ‘messenger,’ Swanton places emphasis on the agent’s *ability* to argue for herself, as well as, to attend openly to the validity claims of the other dialogue participants. A commitment to correct information consists in:

...dispositions to disclose one’s own perspective, interests and beliefs, to gather data and acknowledge facts, to publicly test claims made during the process of problem resolution, to acknowledge expertise and to trust

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<sup>765</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 258.

<sup>766</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 260.

<sup>767</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 261.

that expertise, to recognise when trust is misplaced, and to change one's beliefs on the strength of evidence and publicly acknowledged mistakes.<sup>768</sup>

The third group comprises the specifically 'dialogical virtues,' which are the virtues specific to group contexts. It is within this context that Swanton for the first time approaches and grapples with the issue of power. Swanton acknowledges that integral to most groups are power imbalances which will result in an exclusion of some participants from dialogue. Groups that appear to be free from power imbalances are only able to maintain solidarity through the acceptance of a shared belief system. Yet, even in these groups, there will still be those left out of the dialogue either because their views are not given serious consideration, or because they lack the confidence to defend their views. It is because of this that it is not enough to articulate one's own views, but it is also necessary to articulate one's views in such a way that others are encouraged to also articulate their views. This becomes paramount when there may be a disagreement of views.

Solving disagreements, Swanton argues, requires 'virtues of practice' among which are dispositions to engage well in and to learn from dialogue with others. So, rather than ignoring opposing views, dialogue should be positively encouraged. The 'virtues of practice' have the aim of facilitating problem solving vis-à-vis the 'constraint integration.' Swanton writes: 'The process of integration is not a process of choosing to ignore certain constraints while focussing on others, of choosing one horn of a supposed dilemma over another. Rather the process is one of transformation of a problem.'<sup>769</sup> It is through a process of specification and re-specification that the 'constraint structure' of a problem becomes tractable since 'the transformed specifications open up a richer range of possibilities for their satisfaction.'<sup>770</sup> It is for this reason that the 'virtues of practice' are to be understood as dynamic and processual, including as they do 'feedback, learning, and modification,'<sup>771</sup> all of which contribute to bringing about successful 'constraint integration.'

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<sup>768</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 262.

<sup>769</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 254.

<sup>770</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 255.

<sup>771</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 265.



Swanton's model of 'constraint integration' differs therefore from straightforward problem-solving in that it does not simply amount to a choice between alternative solutions, but is rather 'an active, developmental process of transformation at an intellectual, emotional and behavioural level.'<sup>772</sup> This dynamic, processual model does not develop by the agent making snap decisions monologically. Rather, it develops initially through the formulation of a mission and/or vision. This initial step is deepened through a narrowing of the 'constraint structure.' Constraints must be understood in their specific context while imaginative deliberation constructs solutions that incorporate various values. Therefore, behavioural changes must be adapted in order that further constraints do not block possible solutions to the problem-solving at hand.

Where Yuval-Davis acknowledges that the transversal approach falters when conflict arises because there is no built in transversal 'way of deciding what to choose,' PVE rephrases the problematic as one to do with providing an ethical account of the affective preconditions necessary. PVE offers a picture of the self at work in problem-solving situations that approaches the task through the active cultivation of the virtues, where virtue is understood as a prototype that is, it is a framework of sorts that is broadly constrained and is further elaborated, or made more specific, through the integrating roles of love, respect and creativity (covered in the previous chapter). It is the 'contourings' of love, respect and creativity that make virtue (the prototype) applicable in concrete situations.

Finally, I turn to the issue of how agents finally do formulate the 'I want this for us' that I have argued is the defining task of identity politics. This articulation calls upon the agent to formulate a judgment and this judgment relies on a certain type of self-knowledge. Looking at the transversal approach, defining a shared vision, is done through 'rooting' and 'shifting.' Recall that 'rooting' has the aim of honouring diversity, of allowing the agent to maintain her identity and to be assured that she can walk away from any dialogic encounter just the same as she was when she walked in. 'Shifting' has the aim of being a way in which the agent can listen to what

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<sup>772</sup> Swanton, *Virtue Ethics: A Pluralistic View*, 265

another participant in the dialogue has to say. It has the more global aim of putting oneself in the 'situation' of those with whom one is in dialogue. 'Transversal politics' is based on a commitment that difference should encompass equality. Therefore all participants share a commitment to the importance of difference and must (in 'rooting' and 'shifting') work to acknowledge power structures that function to disrupt equality. Yet, it still remains to me unclear here on what basis, once the agent has 'put herself in the situation of the other' she will formulate her judgments (on what projects to undertake). Does the 'shifting' run the risk of 'colonising' the place of the other? What are the dispositions necessary to undertake the 'shifting' in such a way that it does not efface differences? Is this a self-interested 'shift'? Is it a 'shift' motivated by friendship? What is made clear is that the 'shift' is undertaken from a 'rooted' position, which is a position of self-knowing. The self-knowing is an awareness of the agent's social positionings vis-à-vis the different other. This self-knowledge remains in the position of a cognitive self-knowledge. Because the 'transversal' approach does not have the aim to transform the self, but rather to preserve it in its difference, this is not an ethical self-knowledge.

A PVE account, because it is motivated by virtue, depends upon a different sort of self-knowledge. The question needs to be raised though as to whether or not this self-knowledge is in any way linked to the agent's positioning in regards to gender, race, sexuality, etc. Swanton does provide the necessary context for the agent – she is not the autonomous, lone, rational chooser, doing it all on her own. She is firmly rooted in the context of her social structure. Recall that it is through the contextual situation of the agent, Swanton develops the modes of moral acknowledgement as love, respect and creativity.

A shift in focus away from identity issues per se and towards a vision of the common, towards the problem of collective action in a context of inequality and difference, relies on a particular conception of the person and a certain type of agency, which although not ever assured, must be conceived in the agent through the formation of critical self-reflection, and a willingness to engage in action. PVE

highlights the integrative function of virtue in the good life [and focuses] on virtue as a property of human beings in which their ‘inner’ lives are in order, and in harmony with and expressed by, their ‘outer’ actions. The agent of virtue ethics is deeply reflective. It is only the agent herself who knows whether or not her actions match her intentions.

## Conclusion

This chapter has offered a very a preliminary sketch of what my suggestion for a feminist pluralistic virtue ethics might look when applied to a specific context/event. I have suggested that hints of the explanatory power of a PVE approach can be made use of to understand and evaluate some aspects of the recent case of the NIWC. I have also indicated how a PVE account can help to enrich some aspects of a ‘transversal’ politics approach. Much of the literature frames this case within the methodology of ‘transversal politics,’ or coalition politics, and generally interprets it as an example of the possibility and success of practicing transversal politics as opposed to identity politics. I did not so much take issue with transversalism as an accurate and fruitful methodology for interpreting and understanding the NIWC. Instead, my aim was to show how a PVE account can be operationalised and in so doing, I noted the overlaps, as well as, the divergences between the transversal approach and the pluralistic virtue ethical approach. Although there are certain similarities between ‘transversalism’ and PVE, the latter offers a richer and broader framework through which to understand the self in feminist identity politics and thus, may serve as a resource to enrich the transversal politics framework.

In PVE, identities can be crucially reconnected to the dialogic process; the inner work of the agent involved in creating new meaning (self in relation to other, and self in relation to context – in short, identity) is brought into focus; and the social/political and structural nature of the dialogic process between the self and the other is developed. A PVE framework, as I have developed it, in which we have in place a rich account of the self, allows for the filling in of important gaps in feminist theory. We can draw on pluralistic virtue ethics to outline the attitudes and

dispositions that diverse groups of women working across difference cultivate in order to establish non-repressive, affirmative political connections.

## Conclusion – Reformulating feminist identity politics and the problematic of ethics as *praxis*

My articulation of ethics as *praxis* develops out of a dissatisfaction with the two apparently mutually exclusive prospects that contemporary feminism as a collective political movement faces – either a politics of difference disengaged from a contestable ethical grounding, or its opposite, the fruitless search for a normative framework that could transcend the conflicts of difference (of race, gender, class, sexuality relations). In order to avoid, without ignoring, either of these poles, I found it necessary to use as a starting point those postmodern accounts that take seriously, and as a starting point, the issues of difference/diversity and conflict. Although the postmodern accounts of Brown and Butler are most generally taken as paradigmatic of postmodernism's indifference to the real, lived experience of identity – as felt suffering and real injustice – I find in both of these theorists' accounts a productive alternative to the impasse. Both Brown and Butler take as their starting points the context of the complexity and multiplicity of the forms of antagonism that are inherent in gender, sex and race relations. Read together, Brown and Butler allow for a radical reformulation of identity politics as an ethical problematic. By taking a genealogical and historical approach to subject constitution, they allow for a centring of the suffering and antagonisms and irreducible embodiment at work in the constitution of subjects. They re-articulate the problematic as an issue of conceptualising freedom as a *praxis* which entails a ceaseless accountability. By bringing into dialogue traditions that do not normally engage with each other – postmodernism, feminism, moral philosophy, in particular, virtue ethics – I scrutinize the possibility of ethics as a problematic for feminist identity politics.

Understanding ethics as *praxis* suggests that what is central in situations of collective political projects is the issue of alterity, which frames and forms the constitution and transformation of identities. Centring alterity suggests that there is hard work to be

undertaken if feminists are to forge and sustain collective political bonds. Indeed, according to difference feminists like Hartsock, women's experiences are only recoverable within a framework of *doing* and not within a framework of *being*. It is in recovering the collective dimension of difference feminism as collective political activity that Hartsock reminds feminism that women must *struggle* to undertake work *as* a group. Acknowledging the hard work that is involved in working as a group is not enough. On-the-ground examples, like those provided by the NIWRM, show that difference feminism meets its limits if in order to create a feminist solidarity based on sameness results in a denial of differences. Avoiding diversity ultimately leads to irresolvable splits and fragmentations.

Ethics as a problematic for collective feminism cannot be separated from the antagonisms of multiple and diverse identities. Diversity feminists like Collins critique the racial bias of the identity of the subject in difference feminist theory. It is not possible, nor is it desirable, to expand the unified category of mainstream difference feminism. Rather, a separate category for 'Black women' is staked out and insists on attentiveness and responsiveness. Black feminist organisations like the Crunk Feminist Collective work from within Collins' framework and press the issue to collective feminism that acknowledgement of, and responsibility for, the other must be what serves to motivate the desire for collective political struggles against oppression. Diversity feminists, like the Black Women's Blueprint, insist that part of the difficult work of collective politics is about validating 'the already historically entrenched' identities we mutually constitute. Antagonism and conflict can never be 'left at the door.'

Because difference and conflict cannot be transcended, there is no pre-given consensus or higher moral authority that individuals participating in collective political projects have access to. Postmodernist accounts like those of Brown and Butler work to accept the thesis of diversity feminists that gender difference cannot ever alone achieve anything close to an accurate description of gender, racial, class, or sexual identity. They begin from the premises that to try to pretend otherwise is to avoid confronting the inextricable link between contesting and refiguring mutually

constituting and mutually reinforcing identities. Brown articulates politicized identities as ‘injured states,’ thereby re-framing the debate of feminist identity politics in terms of psychic states. Recovering the affective dimension of identity politics pushes feminism to pay attention to the investments that are at work in the entrenchment of political positions that lead to a truncated and distorted desire in political aspirations. It is only through an ethical rephrasing of the problematic that ‘desire’ can be transformed.

Butler foregrounds the body (as gendered, as sexed, as raced) as the locus of an ethical and political struggle. The two cannot be separated. She renders ethics embodied. She offers a radical rethinking of the boundaries and content of ethics. Rather than transcending social and political conflict, she offers an understanding of ethics as transformative of difference and conflict. This ethics does not take as its task the working out of universal normative criteria that the subject follows in each and every instance. Rather, this ethics requires the cultivation of dispositions that would allow the subject to surmise in each instance what is the *better* way to respond in a situation in which she has to acknowledge and take responsibility for ‘the already historically entrenched’ collective identities at play. The accountability that Butler exhorts is one that requires not only active engagement of the individual, but also emphasises the necessity of formulating judgments without recourse to the assurance of normative criteria.

These formulations of ethics, I maintain, hold in common a starting point comparable to a distinction made in moral philosophy exemplified by Sandel’s critique of liberalism. Sandel draws out the inner life of the agent as a matter of self-knowledge and self-reflection. Self-reflection is what is necessary to carry out transformative work on the self. However, although Sandel centres the irreducible role of self-reflection in the project of embodying the subject, his subject reaches its limit since alone it is incapable of elaborating how it can take up a non-appropriative relation to the other. Foucault elaborates Sandel’s self-reflective self. What is found in Foucault is that when the self ‘turns its lights’ inwards, self-knowledge and self-reflection are mediated through ‘care of the self,’ which deepens understandings of

the inner life of the self and its relation to the project of self-transformation.

Foucault's work is in the same timber as Sandel's, but moves further and more radically to establish a new mode of relating to the self in which freeing oneself of identity is not what is stressed. Foucault insists that the relations we hold with our selves are not those of identity, but ones of 'differentiation, of creation, of innovation.'

Ethics as *praxis* involves the self in relation to itself, in relation to others, to values and to projects and this sort of work necessitates a turn inwards. The turn is one that is enabled by the self's relation to others and is undertaken for the purpose of being able to work *better* with others. Therefore, the self is not left unchanged, but is transformed by and through this inward turn. Foucault emphasises the element of 'care of the self' (*epimeleia heatou*) involved in this work and draws out how this entails hard work – there are many tasks which the self must intentionally undertake here. Although Foucault's 'care of the self' does not entirely neglect the issue raised by *ressentiment* of the presumption of the direction that the *telos* takes, I turn to Murdoch's work which shows how within an ethics of transformation (*praxis*) this problem can be much more richly elaborated.

Both Foucault and Murdoch counter those approaches to ethics which are most familiar. Rather than taking the task of ethics to be only that of working out normative criteria, they steer us through the complexities of alterity and identity. Foucault shows us how to ready ourselves for the task of alterity. Murdoch pushes us to elaborate a normative vocabulary that may be up to the task of such work. Choice-guiding words will never suffice. Murdoch points us to look in the direction of virtue ethics. Foucault does not shy away from this ethical tradition. Indeed, for him, virtue is counter to those moral systems of regulation and order. He posits virtue as locatable in the resistance of the established order of things. This follows the thread beginning already with Butler, who situates herself in this same ethical tradition. So, it is here that I follow this thread and turn to virtue ethics. What is at stake is whether this helps us to constructively confront the question of responsibility and respect for the other in a manner that can motivate and sustain struggles against oppression.



In turning to an elaboration of a richer normative vocabulary through an engagement with virtue ethics, I acknowledge and interrogate the feminist hesitation in endorsing such undertakings. Taking Okin's critique as paradigmatic of many feminist misgivings, I acknowledge and endorse the concern that feminism should be wary of working from a prior list of virtues, this is after all, counter to my own project. A careful reading of Aristotle reveals there is scope for an enquiry into how a reflecting self would fill out the idea of choice-worthiness.

Some feminists have engaged with virtue ethics. Tessman posits a *eudaimonistic* virtue ethics as critical for feminism. I argue against this because it ushers in the danger of rendering the notion of 'the good' incontestable and finalisable. For a virtue ethical approach to allow for the radical contingency of social relations at work in collective political projects, I argue that *eudaimonia*, either explicit or implicit, must be approached as fully contestable. Only by loosening the connection between the virtues and *eudaimonia* can the virtues be developed for ends other than *eudaimonia*.

Nussbaum is another notable feminist who draws on virtue ethics for emancipatory feminist aims. Her CA lists those human capabilities that all nations should provide support for and that governments should be pressured to guarantee to all citizens to be so enabled. She is both committed to a standard Aristotelian virtue ethics *and* modern liberalism. Her liberal account of human nature assumes that agents are autonomous decision makers, and therefore, privileges the agent's capability to choose, develop and maintain the functions necessary for choice making.

Nussbaum's work is problematic for my project because she endorses a universal and spelled out account of human flourishing.

Finally, I turn to a pluralistic account of virtue ethics, which as a non-eudaimonistic virtue ethics elaborates a self that although 'inextricably' related to the good, posits the notion of the good as not finally definable. Only a non-eudaimonistic virtue ethics in which virtue is not an end state of perfection, allows for virtue, and thus, the

practicing of virtues, to be construed as a ‘dynamic process-notion.’ A number of ethical concepts - such as love, respect, and creativity– contribute to enriching the picture of the inner life of the self. I show how PVE addresses the central notion of ‘desire’ as comprised of both ‘vision’ and ‘attention’ in order to show the picture of the self with the full resources of an inner life. A complex normative vocabulary becomes available that paints a picture of the person that provides the basis for a richer approach to the ethical concerns raised in identity politics.

The strengths of a PVE can be illustrated in examining what contribution it makes to on the ground situations of collective political organising across difference and conflict. It shows how identities can be crucially reconnected to the dialogic process. It brings into focus the inner work of the agent involved in creating the new. It highlights and develops the social/political and structural nature of the dialogic process between the self and the other. A PVE framework as I have developed, in which we have in place a rich account of the self, is able to fill in important gaps in feminist theory. We can draw on PVE to outline the attitudes and dispositions that diverse groups of women working across difference cultivate in order to establish non-repressive, affirmative political connections.

The originality of this work lies in how it is situated between feminist theory, political theory, identity politics and moral philosophy. By taking an on-going debate in feminist theory/identity politics and suggesting a re-framing in language closer to moral philosophy, the research offers an exploration of the problematic in ways that have not yet been extensively explored. By probing, in particular, the new work in virtue ethics of philosophers like Swanton, this thesis uses it in ways that do not appear to have been explored yet for the contribution it could make to the feminist identity politics debate. It is in this way that this thesis makes a contribution to expanding the resources available to feminism to deal with difference and conflict, which is at the centre of its very survival as a movement for political and social change.

Although the main focus of the research lies in the area of the problematics of feminist identity politics, it also critically engages with the newly developing field of modern day virtue ethics. As such this project makes a contribution to this field. There is scope in virtue ethics and PVE in particular, to be developed further in political theory and feminist theory. As of yet, aside from Tessman and Nussbaum, there has not been a lot of interest in political theory, in particular in feminism to develop virtue ethics – beyond as a debate over whether or not it is care ethics.

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